

“SET FREE TO SERVE”

1st Sunday after Christmas December 28, 2008

Gal 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

Introduction:

The central message of our New Testament lessons is clear. God does not want us – his human creation – to be lost from God’s presence. God created us so we can enjoy each other’s company for eternity. It is about Salvation. Salvation is the message of Christmas.

Salvation Has Two Equal Emphases:

One description for Holy Scripture is it a two-edged sword. The Bible tells the story of God’s creation; the human breaking away from obedience to God - which is sin - and God’s plan to restore us to the position of family – sons and daughters of God.

Now, imagine a sword. It has two edges. One side of the sword’s blade is described as personal righteousness. There are two ways for humans to become personally righteous. One way is for us to become perfect. Jesus said to the Pharisees who were the most righteous people of his day: *“be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48). In that statement Jesus was letting us know that if we want to work our way to heaven through our personal righteousness then the standard of that righteousness is God Himself.

I don't want to confuse you. Going to heaven by being as perfect as God is a legitimate way to go to heaven. It is one of God's pathways to heaven. It is the way of Jesus Himself. Hebrews 5:9 says it this way: *and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, . . .* . But being perfect is really difficult to accomplish.

Image the best human being you know. It could be a parent, a teacher, a coach. It could be Mother Teresa, or Billy Graham. Now imagine that your 'best human being who ever lived' person only sinned three times each day. Only once every day did that person have an ugly, inappropriate thought; only once each day did that person say something s/he wished they could take back and not say, or say it differently; only once per day did that person fail to do exactly God's will. Only three sins per day; that person is truly a Saint.

Yet, three sins per day over 313 days (I'm assuming your people were perfect on Sunday's) comes to 939 sins per year. And, let's assume they're sins were no greater than the equivalent of parking tickets. So, 939 parking tickets each year, for – let's say 60 years. That amounts to 56,340 sins - the equivalent of parking tickets.

Now, imagine your best persons are at the end

of their lives. They've been really good persons all their lives, but they have never asked Jesus Christ to forgive them of their sin.

It is late one evening and there is a knock at the door. When the door is opened there is a Police Officer with a warrant for the arrest of your 'best person'. When the officer is asked what the charge is he replies, "it is for failing to pay, or take care of, over 56,000 outstanding parking tickets. In shame that person is hand-cuffed and let out to the waiting patrol car, whose flashing lights have attracted half the neighborhood.

When your 'best person' is ushered into the court room he notices the judge's bench is covered with a small mountain of paper. After the judge is seated he pushes his hand through the stacks of paper clearing an opening through which he can address the defendant. "Do you know what this stack of paper is?" "No sir, I don't". "Well, I'm sad to inform you that it is over 56,000 outstanding parking tickets. Any one of these would be no big deal. But there is no way I can ignore this much disregard for the law – even the parking laws. You sir, or maam, are a flagrant violator of the law. I have to punish you, and I will. You are sentenced to 90 days in the County Jail Farm."

“But sir, I am at the end of my life. I don’t think I can survive 90 days in jail. I don’t want to die a criminal. Isn’t there anything you can do?” “I’m sorry, but justice must be served. Guilty as charged; 90 days!”; and the judge’s gavel slams on the bench.

The reality is none of us are without sin. That makes it impossible for us to earn our way into Heaven.

The second way to go to heaven is through the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Having become perfect through His personal life and through the suffering of the cross, Jesus now offers us the easy way to heaven. The way is pioneered through himself. Having become the righteousness of God Jesus now offers that righteousness to everyone who will ask him to forgive them and trust him with their souls – for all eternity.

Let me finish the story where it left off in the Court Room: Having pronounced a sentence fitting the perpetual crimes, the judge says, “I’m sorry for you”. The judge then does something never before seen in his courtroom. The judge stands up, unzips his robe and takes it off, moves off the bench and goes down to stand beside the convicted criminal.

“I don’t want you to die in my jail because of your unpaid parking tickets. I don’t want that on my

conscience. So, here's what I'm going to do. You go home. You are free to live out your days at home with your family. I will serve your time for you. Have a good rest of your life."

In that story we have an illustration of what God does for us through Jesus Christ. Our sins are known to God, however trivial they may seem to us. It's not only the one sin, it is the accumulation of our disobedience that God must deal with at the end of our lives. God is both a just and a merciful God. Justice requires that our sin be punished. Mercy means that God – through Jesus – pays the penalty, and sets us free. If we were not set free. If we were not covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ justice would demand that none of us be allowed into Heaven. In God's mercy, however, we are not only allowed in, a party is thrown in our honor. That is the salvation God is offering us – fore told by prophets as long ago as Isaiah.

So, the first edge of the Gospel Sword is personal righteousness – achievable only through Jesus Christ.

The second edge on the gospel sword is the works of righteousness. Works of righteousness, or good works, are the things we do to help others come closer to

God, to others, and to themselves. They are works we do inside the church and outside the church.

The Gospel message of salvation is this: that God – through Jesus Christ - has saved us from sin, and set us free to serve others.

I'm bringing this up today because we are entering into a period of stewardship that will carry us deep into 2009. I'm calling our Stewardship emphasis

The Way of The Cross:

Jesus went to the Cross in order to reconcile us to His Heavenly Father, to others and to our selves. We engage in stewardship in order to participate in God's ministry of reconciliation, thereby serving God, Church, and our World.

On January 4th we will discuss how we serve God. On January 11th, how we serve the church, and on January 18th, how we serve our world.

I am developing commitment forms that you can use to make your commitments of time – how you serve God; talent – how you serve the church; and treasure – how you serve our world.

What I'm asking all of us to do is to begin praying and asking God what He wants us to do to assist in this church's ministry of reconciliation. That means

each of us should be involved in some way in helping here, at the church; or in helping other people either learn about God's love for them or to assist them with some earthly need as a way of sharing God's love.

In this Way of The Cross there is a place for everyone to be involved. God needs each of us to share our selves. Each of us was born with talent from God, or has been given a spiritual gift from God that should be used in ministry. All of us can make a financial commitment to support the work of the church. The more of us who participate in the Way of The Cross the healthier our church will become and the more people we will reach with the Gospel of Jesus Christ: either through witnessing about our faith or participating in the works of righteousness.

When you receive January's Hosanna please read it and begin praying about your part. All the details of the 'Way of The Cross' Stewardship Campaign, and our new ministry structure are laid out there. Also, the Vestry and I will have gone through the various responses from your individual prayers during the "Seeking God's Will" prayer times. Out of these should come a greater sense of our outreach priorities for 2009.

One image of the Church in the New Testament

is we are a body – and every part of the Body is important. One part cannot say to the another, “I have no need of you.” All the parts need to work together fro the body to be its healthiest.

Holy Cross needs all of us doing what God would have us do; what we are talented, or gifted for. That way, we are at our healthiest and will make our greatest impact on our community. The Way of The Cross is a tool for you to say, “here’s where I will serve and here’s how much I think God wants me to give. I’m in for the year!

God Bless you, and Us. Amen?