

“That Whoever Believes in Him May
Have Eternal Life” 4 Lent B

The word of God today clearly declares two truths about God and the believer: God saves whoever believes and whoever truly believes is employed by God to go and do good works in His name. You can not be “saved” by grace through faith and expect that you are finished with God. Salvation does not work that way. While works do not save a person for eternity, if there is no evidence of good deeds as a response to Christ in our life, then His gift has never been opened. Lent is a good time to consider whether we are just *saying* we received God’s gift of love but have never truly opened it. Lent is a time for prayer, repentance and giving and receiving forgiveness. It’s a good time to open God’s gift of eternal life.

The Church can not save us from sin and eternal death anymore than good works by themselves can. Luther and the Reformation taught that we could not save ourselves. The reformers wrote that the Church had gone too far from the apostolic teaching it received and had built itself too far from the foundation of Christ; that it sold its birthright for a “get out of jail sale.” The good news of God’s love became a “rummage sale” of indulgences by the Catholic Church at that time.

That’s what disturbed Luther. The scriptures taught that salvation was not of one’s own doing. Yet what he saw was a system of getting people to give wealth, and say things and do things, all for a promise of eternal life. Essentially, “buying their way into heaven”.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” Luther went too far over to the side of grace and faith, almost to the point of eliminating the purpose of Christ’s death and gift of new life.

The purpose of Christ’s life was to establish a people that spiritually desire and are destined for good works. God made us for good works. God wants the glory for those good works. He wants everything done in the name of Christ. It sounds strange to say He wants His stamp on the good we do. I say it this way to make a point.

St. Paul continues, “For we are what He has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” Ephesians 2:8-10.

The good news is that Christ has already done the hard work on the cross. The bad news for some is that God’s grace is not cheap. Cheap grace might be sold at yard sales but not in the Bible. The truth is that you and I, and you and I alone, must prove that God saved us by *living* like saved people – no one else can do that for us. In Romans 5:8, St Paul writes, “But God proves his love toward us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” God proves His love. His people must prove their love in return. A relationship requires proof of love or it ceases to exist. Sacrificial love requires evidence or proof on both sides.

Anyone can say anything he wants to try to prove his innocence, but in a court of law it's the evidence that convicts him or sets him free.

I can make any promise I want to; walk the aisle while singing "Just as I Am without One Plea" during a Billy Graham crusade; "I can give my body to be burned," St. Paul writes, "but if I have not (active)love, I am nothing."

I can enter the waters of baptism and grow up and live like the devil. Yet Baptism requires a daily response from us to God's love in Christ. That is true even if the bishop baptizes us as a child. That is why the parents and congregation promise to guide the child in the paths of righteousness. It is a serious promise and a sacred responsibility. Unless faith bears fruit we can get as wet as a Baptist preacher can put us underwater, yet not be convicted as a true follower of Jesus Christ.

I've asked this question before at a World Religions class and it is a good one for us to ponder: "If you were brought before a court of law for the crime of being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?" The voice of the martyrs in Nigeria, in the Sudan, in the former Soviet Union, in the Republic of China, will rise up on the Day of Judgment and will sing the praises of those who were guilty of following Christ.

We live in a day when our witness of faith in Christ is hardly challenged because we have falsely been led into complacency by thinking that all we need do is look at the cross.

In Moses' day his people only looked at the serpent raised up in order to save them. But the rest of the story came later when their faith shrank in the face of obstacles. John's gospel today is clearly warning that looking alone at the cross will not save us for very long. We read that, "Those who believe in Him (Christ) are not condemned." Those that are condemned did not truly believe in the name of the Son of God but loved darkness, because their deeds were evil. Listen to what John writes later: "But those who do what is true, come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Here is the good news. God did not leave us without a test for true faith in Christ. True Christianity is made clear when good works have been done in God. Deeds done in the name of Christ are evidence once again of true faith.

These deeds are done in the open not to be seen by men or the church, not to boast, not to earn merit badges or get noticed by newspapers. These acts of faith are done with the pure heart of a servant, not begrudgingly or for fame. Deeds of faith eventually distinguish themselves from those that are deeds "of recognition." Works done in Christ shall outlast those done as human monuments. Good deeds never before seen by men yet done in the name of Christ will be exalted. The more light shines on the darkness the more God is glorified, and He is vindicated that Jesus did not die in vain. That is the single most important reason to do good works -- so that Christ has not died in vain. The challenge for those who call themselves Christians is to live in such a way that Christ's horrible death has been justified.

I have friends that are not Christians, yet are good people. Their goodness and deeds can also be exposed to the light to give glory to God. I pray for them that they may come to faith in Christ and be adopted as His sons and daughters. I also know that saying what one believes on Sunday in church does not make us worthy of the name of Christ, anymore than having a garage will magically produce a car. The garage is empty without a vehicle and so is human life without Christ. I know my life was empty until I decided to be in relationship with Christ. I had to consciously make the decision. Ultimately, because God so loved the world and I can not, I render to God the things that are God's and leave the saving of souls to Him. Yet, I know He needs me to be a witness of the love He has born in my heart. If I do not tell of His love and forgiveness then do I truly love Him? God wants a relationship of genuine love!

Last Saturday, I went to a wedding of a cousin; very simple, yet lovely and spiritual. The pastor talked about having the "fragrance of Christ" surround us as individuals. A fragrance is something to be enjoyed and shared; something that people notice just by being around you. A fragrance smells lovely and makes others smile and that was what Robyn and I felt in that wedding service. The wedding was more about Jesus *in the life* of the bride and groom than about the bride and groom themselves.

Then something caught my eye above the exit doors of that church. There was a sign above the door frames that read in quotes, "Entering the mission field."

Holy Week is coming, and we are to share the fragrance of Christ out in the world. I can not think of an easier way to proclaim God's love than in a service of worship. The whole week is holy unto the Lord. It is not the kind of week where you "pick your favorite service" or which service is most convenient. Holy Week is more about Jesus than about us, just like that wedding was more about Jesus than Andy and Rosana. Yet if it were not for us, that He gave up His life, there would be no point to having church. For these services are our responses of love to God-- a time when we need to acknowledge Christ's sacrifice for us. Yet, each year I look around and wonder about that love response when there are fewer and fewer of us present during the most important days of our Christian faith.

As you leave this day, and enter the mission field, I ask you to think deeply on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. I ask you to come to at least Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and either of the Easter services. These three services at Trinity can be a testament of your love to the Holy Trinity for what God has done in your life and in the life of those you love.

"God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever may believe in Him may not perish but have eternal life." While God's love is clearly unconditional, the words "*may*" in John 3:16 clearly make His promise of eternity conditional. There is no guarantee of a heaven until that day when we hear the voice of God calling us, "Come home, come home." Yet we have this hope that His judgment is always tempered by His mercy. May God find you living in His promise

of eternal life both now and forever! The Lord be with you! I invite you to pray with me in these or in your own words:

God in your mercy you sent Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the world. I thank you for sending Him to die for my sins on the cross. By this I know you love me. I receive Jesus Christ once again into my heart as my Lord and my Savior. Now I give my life to you. I promise to prove my love by living and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with others. I surrender myself to you with all that I am and all that I have to the glory of God. Amen.