

Living Before the Face of God: Healed and Whole

From the series: Meeting God Again For the First Time

Text: Habakkuk 3:18; Luke 19:9

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
November 23, 1997

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Marcus Borg, whose book, *The God We Never Knew*, has provided for me the themes of the preaching this fall, concludes the book with a chapter entitled, "Salvation: What On Earth Do We Mean?" You know that I like language and I like play on words and I love the way he has used an idiom in that title, for "what on earth do we mean" is borrowing that idiom "on earth," an expression which we use without reflection, although we know how to use it and when to use it. I heard it in my youth most often, when my father said to me, "What on earth are you thinking?" And we all use it with one another when there is something that we think is out of line, something out of order, something that is being misused or maybe some ugliness or some meanness.

"What on earth are you saying?"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"What on earth are you doing?"

It is interesting to study the derivation of idioms. I don't know where that one came from, but I know this - that when we use it, we don't really mean, "What on earth are you doing," as opposed to, "What on the moon are you doing?" or, "What on Mars are you doing." We don't mean anything by "on earth." It's just an expression that has come into our language and we use it. We know when to use it and how to use it, and everybody understands when we do use it.

When a phrase becomes an idiom that is taken for granted, then it can be rolled back, then it can be restored to its literal sense to make a point. And that's exactly what Marcus Borg does. "What on earth do we mean by salvation?" Not, "What is salvation in terms of eternal life?" Not, "What is salvation in the religious sense in which we usually think about it?" Marcus Borg has tried to get us to re-imagine, to re-think, and in this final chapter he challenges us to re-think salvation or to think again about salvation and its meaning and, as he has done throughout the course of the book, he has sought to focus our attention here rather than there. Now rather than then. On earth rather than in heaven.

What on earth do we mean by salvation? In other words, what is salvation in my present experience? What does salvation mean for the *here and now*, my everyday existence? That hauls us up short, because we tend to think about salvation as that escape that God has provided us in order to save us from condemnation and to bring us to glory. In so doing, focus is other-worldly. It is of another age, and far too often it has far too little content relative to the life I am living right now. And I think that tragically we pour another-worldly content into it, failing to stop to think in order to experience salvation on earth, now, every day, in our ordinary days, in our ordinary life.

Salvation. The word itself reminds us of salve. Salve is a healing ointment which we apply to wounds. Another word in that family is salvage. Salvation includes the salvaging of our lives. Salvation, then, speaks about healing and the move toward wholeness. The title of the sermon is "Healed and Whole," and I should qualify that, lest I imply that salvation is some status that we achieve or some achievement that we bring to ourselves as a finished product. Much rather, let me say, living before the face of God, healing and moving toward wholeness, because I believe that salvation is a *process*, not a product. It is that which is engaging our existence day by day, not something that has moved us from one status to another and guaranteed the future.

Salvation. What on earth do we mean?

I wish for a few moments you could disengage from everything you have ever been taught, ever heard about, ever thought about salvation. These old words become so encrusted with baggage, with nuances, connotations. And they're so connected with particular experiences, people and places that it is very hard for us to break through and to think salvation in a fresh and clear manner. I know that we can't wash our minds of all of that which has accrued over all of our years but, just for a moment, think with me about salvation on earth, the process of being saved, here and now. I suspect that most of us have moments when we ask ourselves, what on earth is my life amounting to? What on earth am I doing? What on earth am I giving myself to? What is my life? Where am I going? What of my life?

Most of the time we're busy enough so that we can get off that in a hurry and we can get on to important things like appointments and setting new goals and allowing the drivenness of our lives and our compulsions to keep us moving, not pausing long enough to allow those moments of serious reflection to penetrate to the depths, just to stay and to wait long enough with the questions. What is my life?

But, sometimes it does happen. Perhaps some of you are experiencing those questions this morning. Maybe a medical diagnosis, a loss of employment, a loss of a loved one. Maybe just a boredom of ordinary days. And then there is that pause and that question.

I suspect something like that was going on with Zacchaeus. We don't know, but we are told that he was a chief tax collector, and that he was rich. So, externally, I suppose we would say Zacchaeus was doing all right. Of course, he had joined the enemy. He became an agent of the oppressing power; he was in the upper echelons of the tax bureaucracy and everyone hates tax people. And so, he had to make a decision. He could live, apparently, with the rejection of his fellow Jews, his countrymen. But something was going on. Something was eating at him. Maybe it was just that Zacchaeus no longer really liked Zacchaeus. We know something was going on because Zacchaeus scrapped his dignity and scrambled up a sycamore tree in order to get a glimpse of Jesus who was going to pass that way.

The reputation of Jesus had preceded him. He was a person known for healing; he was a charismatic personality; he seemed to move multitudes and he had been an agent of the transformation of people's lives, and I suspect that Zacchaeus was there on more than a celebrity hunt. I'm sure there were many who crowded around to see this person, but I suspect that anybody who goes to the measures that Zacchaeus goes to had something deeper in mind, and he must have been totally shocked to get the invitation of Jesus, who invited himself to Zacchaeus' home. We're not told a lot about it, except that Zacchaeus seemed to experience a total transformation, giving away half of what he earned, and being willing to restore fourfold to anyone whom he had defrauded. The story is just a little vignette, and the details aren't there, but we can imagine something going on - a person suddenly stops to say, "What is my life? What on earth am I doing?", who encounters Jesus, drawing forth from Jesus the comment at the end, "Today salvation has come to this home."

Salvation. Jesus didn't say that Zacchaeus had been outside of the covenant and now came in. Indeed, he says he, too, is a child of the covenant. He, too, is a son of Abraham. No, it was something else that was going on internally with Zacchaeus. Maybe it was the dignity and the respect that Jesus accorded him, he being so used to being despised and rejected of all humankind. I can imagine that, when Jesus saw that little fellow up in the tree, called him down, watched him scramble, Jesus probably fell in love with him right there, maybe had a good bellylaugh. Maybe it was just that genuine human encounter, just the sense that someone looked at Zacchaeus as a human being, accorded him some dignity, some person-to-person reality that turned him inside out, transformed him. Jesus said that *that* was salvation. Jesus didn't say a lot about repentance and faith and all of the stuff that we've barnacled that term up with. Jesus met a person and somehow or other must have said through body language or real language, "Zacchaeus, you are accepted." And Zacchaeus was changed forever.

I love the description of grace that we have on the cover of your bulletin. It's by Paul Tillich and I have never found anything that I think says it any better. I see Zacchaeus in those opening lines. Tillich says,

The experience of grace strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

I wonder if that's not what was going on with Zacchaeus, if that's not what made him scurry up the sycamore tree. Can you identify with some of this? Those moments of reflection when we pause long enough to look ourselves in the mirror and what we see causes us to say, "What on earth am I doing? What on earth am I giving my life to? Who am I, anyway?" Tillich says it can happen at a moment like that. Maybe grace is experienced at a moment of encounter such as Zacchaeus and Jesus when

... a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you and the name of which you do not know.

Tillich says, if it ever happens to you,

... Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! If that happens to us, we experience grace.

You see, he belabors the point because the whole gospel of Jesus Christ has been associated with the religion of performance. We can talk about grace until we are blue in the face, but it always brings with it all of the trappings of religion that involve repentance and obedience and performance and that God Who is the monarch, the all-glorious king afar off, the God Who is the offended deity, Who, to be sure, loves us and has provided a way for the embrace, nonetheless is a God before Whom to be honest we cower because we know we can never measure up. So, Tillich says if there is ever such a golden moment in your life, just sit still, just wait, soak it in, absorb it. Don't try to do anything. Don't try to figure it out. Don't intend anything; don't perform anything; just let it soak in and accept it. I'm accepted. Just accept your acceptance!

That must have been the experience of Zacchaeus, and it is really so simple because, you see, the gospel of Jesus Christ would not be good news if it brought with it some demand on our part, some performance, something we have to believe. How can you believe what you don't believe? If you believe, it is a gift. Faith is a gift, not something you can generate within yourself, some path of performance. Well, that, too, is grace, the expression of our lives, the genuine, authentic expression of who we are. Grace is precisely that - it is the acceptance of who we are.

Evangelism is not going into all the world and telling the story that can get a response from people. Evangelism, good news, *evangel* is to go into all the world and tell the whole world what is already true, what has been always true, eternally true, and will be eternally true. It is the proclamation, not of what we ought to as human beings do for God, but it is the proclamation of *what God has done*.

If we could just accept it. And it is simple. You are accepted! You are accepted. There's nothing you can do about it. You can never get away from it; it will embrace you, it will chase you. You cannot flee the presence of grace because God is not some monarch afar off, offended, our adversary, our enemy, someone to be appeased and propitiated. God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being, the one who embraces these children at the baptismal font, who passively receives, who goes with us through all our days and will be there at our end; the One Who heard our bawling cry and at the end has one more surprise. If you could just accept it - you are accepted! And if you can hear it, then you still may get into dismay and confusion as Habakkuk when the enemy's at the door and disaster looms on the horizon, and you may cry to God and you'll hear the words that Habakkuk heard, "The just shall live by faith or by faithfulness."

In other words, trust, trust, trust that you are accepted. Trust. And if you hear it, then you say, "Okay, okay. So the olive crop fails, no herds in the field, no cattle in the stall. Strip me naked. Lay me bare, and still I will rejoice in God my salvation, my savior, my salvager, the One who doesn't loom on the other side of eternity waiting to check me in, the moral policeman, the gatekeeper."

No, God is here *now*, trying to get through to us, "You are accepted. You are accepted. You are accepted." And if ever once the soul is seared with the burning, branding iron of grace, then nothing will shake us, nothing will move us, for we have learned in the inner corpuscles of our being that all is grace and all will be well, and that's all there is to it, and *that* is what on earth we mean by salvation, and heaven will take care of itself!

Reference:

Marcus Borg. *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a more Authentic Contemporary Faith*. HarperOne, 1998.

Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," Chapter 19, *The Shaking of the Foundations*. Charles Scribner & Sons, 1955.