

FOLLOWING JESUS: SAVED FROM WHAT?

I John 4:7-21

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Avon Lake UCC
15 August 2021

If someone asks you, “Why do you go to church?”, how do you answer? Some people might say, “Because I always have.” Some might talk about one specific congregation and significant relationships formed there. Some people might refer to a difficult time in life and how their faith helped them through it. Still others might say, “I can’t put it into words; my relationship with God is mystical,” “I need the community of faith in my life.” There are many answers to the question.

Sometimes people ask me the question, and sometimes they probe more deeply. “What is it about the Christian faith that is compelling for you?” And then there are questions like these, “Do you really believe”.....fill in the blank....I have been asked - do you really believe in the virgin birth? Do you really believe that Jesus was physically resurrected? How do you reconcile the inconsistencies in the Bible?”

I may not always appreciate those questions in the moment, especially when they occur in social settings, just when I’ve met someone. But those questions are good for me. They force me to be able to articulate just what it is I **do** believe.

There is a large group of Christian writers and thinkers who are actively working on these questions right now. They are restating the core values of the Christian faith in a way that fits our current world situation and the spirituality of people today. Writers like Rachel Held Evans, Brian McLaren, Diana Butler Bass, Richard Rohr and Marcus Borg — some of whom are no longer with us - have contributed to this dialogue in recent years. I am drawing upon their work in this four-week sermon series.

One of the traditional understandings of Christian life is that it is motivated by fear, especially a fear of hell. The thought process is very simple. Be a good Christian and you'll go to heaven; be a bad person and you'll suffer for eternity. This formula worked for many people for a long time; it still makes sense to some Christians. Over the years, a language developed around heaven and hell. There's very little in the Bible about heaven and hell, but people took small bits and pieces, wove them together and embellished them.

The thought that there is a better future, a place of harmony, an experience of an afterlife without struggle — that was a comforting thought to many oppressed people, to people for whom this earthly life was one of suffering and pain.

Some Christian institutions and some Christian leaders seized upon this fear of hell and capitalized on it. They kept people in church because of it, garnering power over people and their resources.

There always have been followers of Jesus who were uncomfortable with the emphasis on heaven and hell. Recently those voices have become louder and more numerous. One person puts it this way, saying, "It just doesn't make logical sense to me. If God is love, why would God create a world full of fear, with obstacles at every turn from which we need to be saved?" An over-emphasis on sin and salvation language leads people to feel guilty and ashamed - and therefore psychologically unhealthy.

We could do another entire sermon series on how the word "sacrifice" is used in the Bible. I don't want to divert too much attention to that today, but I do think it's important to point out some of the reasons why we need to articulate exactly what we

mean - and don't mean -when we use some of this language. One verse in the passage Tom read says this, "God loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins."

That verse, and others like it, creates huge stumbling blocks for some people and have led them out of the church altogether. Here's why. Let's say you grow up hearing that it was God's plan for God's child Jesus to suffer horrific pain and die in one of the most agonizing ways possible...all so that we would be saved from our sins. And let's say you are one of the millions of people who were abused as a child, perhaps by a parent or other relative, perhaps by another person you trusted...how would you feel about a God who plans for God's own child to suffer?

The Bible talks a lot about salvation, but the biblical understandings of salvation are focused on **this** world, not on the next. There was a vague concept of the afterlife at the time the Bible was written, but the focus is on the present. How can we make life better for people **NOW**?

The root of the English word, "salvation," comes from a Latin word that means "wholeness" or "healing." You can recognize the same roots in the words "salve" and "salvation." So in its broadest sense, salvation means becoming whole and being healed.

So what are we being saved from? Saved from the fiery grip of hell in the afterlife? Or saved from lives that don't feel whole, saved from lives in the here and now that feel broken?

I know that the concept of heaven is still very comforting to many people, and nothing I'm saying today is taking that away. I treasure the image of an afterlife that is a

reunion with family and friends who have gone on before us. But what I really want people to know about the Christian life is that it saves us here, and now. The UCC Statement of Faith, which we'll read together next month on Confirmation Sunday, includes this line: "God seeks, in holy love, to save all people from aimlessness." Imagine an aimless life - no meaning, no purpose, no sense of direction. Wouldn't you feel lost? But we are saved from that.

Our passage from I John connects the love God has for us with the love we are called to share in the world. Verse 11 says, "Friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other." There is no aimlessness in a life of love. You will never run out of meaningful pursuits if you are constantly on the outlook for ways to share God's love.

As I was thinking about this sermon this week, the United Nations issued a "Code Red" warning on climate change - one newspaper had this headline: "Code red for humanity': UN report gives stark warning on climate change, and says wild weather events will worsen." The report was dire, with only a glimmer of hope.

If humanity acts now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we can keep the situation from becoming even worse.

Perhaps we need to be less afraid of the fires of hell and more cognizant of the very real fires and other natural disasters that are occurring throughout this precious planet. We need saving. Our world needs saving. Can we, people motivated by love, make a difference for good before it's too late? Can we who proclaim God as a creative genius pledge to do everything we can to save the beauty of our earthly home for the generations to come?

What would Jesus do? What are we called to do as Jesus' followers if not devote our energies towards saving creation? We can choose to take that glimmer of hope and turn it into our polar star. We can learn about climate change, and we can talk about it - as depressing as it is. And one positive outcome is almost assured. Young people **will** be drawn to our church. People today in their teens, twenties and thirties don't have the luxury of ignoring headlines like the one I read earlier. This is the most critical issue of their lifetimes. If the church isn't talking about it, they'll walk away, shaking their heads about our irrelevance.

Our world needs saving, and we can partner with God in that work of salvation. For what else do we long to be saved?

If you are walking the grief journey, desperately trying to experience some joy in your life again after the loss of a loved one or a relationship, you long to be saved from that stabbing emotional pain. Every morning, when you wake up, in those first few seconds when you come to consciousness, you remember. You remember the disappointment, the painful memory fills your mind. You long to be saved from that grief.

If you are overwhelmed by your everyday responsibilities, caring for others while also trying to manage your own health, fighting off feelings of anxiousness, you long to be saved from burdens that are too heavy for you alone.

What if everyone could imagine God, not as the great Assistant Principal in the sky, keeping track of everyone's behavior, but as the one who wants nothing more than to heal our wounds and take away our pain? What if you were to imagine God as your

most favorite relative, the one in whose lap you sought solace as a young child, the one who always saw the best in you and made you feel better, made you feel loved?

I want the world to be saved from materialism, from the false and dangerous belief that there is something out there that will make us truly and deeply happy. Haven't we learned by now, from our own lives, or from watching the lives of the rich and famous, that it just doesn't work? No shopping spree or new car or fancy dinner is going to ease heartache or bring us peace of mind.

I want the world to be saved from selfish apathy. I know it's tempting, because we're all tired, and the problems seem insurmountable. It's so tempting to just shrug our shoulders and think, "What can I do about racism? What can I do about climate change? What can I do for the people of Haiti who just suffered another devastating earthquake?" Our passage for today asks instead, "What would love do?" Love would choose to read, with an open mind, books about racism and learn about the steps that move us towards justice. Love writes letters to Congress about climate change and learns about everyday actions that make a difference. Love contributes money to earthquake relief. THIS is how we are saved from aimlessness. Love moves us towards lives of hope and purpose.

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear." Because God is love. I hope and pray that each one of you has felt that love - moments when you were powerfully aware of God's presence, nudges that led you towards meaningful action...maybe you know God through the love of another person who brings out the best in you. God is love, and God calls us not to fear but to love...**THAT'S** why we're here.

Let us pray. Holy God, Creator, Savior and Friend, be our companion on this journey. We need your healing and your guidance, and we want to be your partners in the salvation of your beloved world. In Jesus' name. Amen.