

## Who is saved?

Hebrews 9:24-28

A Sermon for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

We're coming to the end of the church year and in these final Sundays, we ask the big questions of what it all means: What is salvation? Who is saved? Where does it all go?

Today we ask: Who is saved? Everyone? A few? Many? Perhaps the common view today is that everybody is going to be saved. Everybody goes to heaven. There is no judgment and nothing is really at stake in this world. While nobody is perfect, and everybody is good enough in some way to be saved. Death is simply transitioning from this world to the next. There is no judgment, nothing at stake.

There are prominent Christian thinkers who say this. Some years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury, one of the most prominent leaders of worldwide Anglicanism, said that what matters in this life is that you have some intention to do good. It's merely "the intention" that matters.

Very similar to this is the prominent Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984), who said that everybody is basically an anonymous Christian, everyone is doing the best they can with the light they have. Because they are, we can say that everybody is saved. It's a matter of good intent, not results, and we'll be the judge of good intentions.

This view that everybody is saved because everybody has good intentions is common in the world today. God is love and grace and ho-hum, that's that.

It makes sense that secular people believe this, but what's puzzling is: Why is this the case also among many Christians, even prominent leaders?

We could say there are several reasons. First, there is astonishing ignorance about the Bible. Take for example, the parable in Matthew 25:46 about the last judgment. It says that some will go to eternal life and others will go to eternal punishment. But there are other verses in the Bible that say something quite different. For example, Paul in Romans 11:22 writes: "God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all."

We can see that the question: Who is saved? is not a question answered simplistically by a Bible verse, case closed. This comes down to the matter of knowing your Bible and what it's really about. It doesn't work to have some simplistic verse or idea from the Bible.

Second, there is a self-serving ignorance about the problem of justice. People will say, as the famous German poet Heinrich Heine did on his deathbed: "Of course, God will forgive me. That's his job." That attitude is widespread even among Christians today.

We can call that view pan-grace-ism. Everybody is saved, and it's all grace. The trouble with that is that it is unjust. If everyone is saved, then there is no justice for the victims of tyrants, terrorists, human traffickers. There is no justice for all crookedness, meanness, and every day evil we and others suffer in our jobs, communities, and families. God will forgive. It's his job, his business.

Shakespeare put it well in *As You Like It*, when he wrote: "All the world's a stage, and the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances. And one man in his time plays many parts . . . ." At the end God rings down the curtain and says: "Wasn't that interesting?" This view that overlooks injustice makes nonsense out of tragedy and evil.

The same goes for those who have God figured out and know exactly who is going to hell. The first Great Awakening, which happened in this country in the 1730's-1750's, was a series of revivals to awaken people to their need of a savior and the savior they needed. Jonathan Edwards, the great Presbyterian preacher, began the Great Awakening, with his sermon: "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." His fire and brimstone preaching aimed to alert listeners to the danger of sin and the terror of being lost, so that they might turn from their disastrous ways and toward Christ.

The underlying issue is that some people are going to be damned. We can find this in the Bible. Matthew 7:13 says: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many."

Again, the question of justice comes up. What if some of those who go the wide way do so because they are confused, misled, or mentally ill? It seems unjust given the brokenness of life.

What about those people who have never heard the Gospel? And the "righteous Gentile" (Acts 10:22)? Are they all eternally lost? What is God's justice.

The third kind of ignorance has to do with how we work with God. We're like Adam and Eve in the temptation story in Genesis 3. We think we'll somehow make it work. We'll deal with the Lord when we have to. We'll figure him out. We can handle him.

We're also like Prometheus, confident of our ways. In Greek mythology (8<sup>th</sup> Century BC), Prometheus steals fire from heaven and gives it to humanity. One of the morals of the story is that even the best intentions can have unintended harmful consequences. As we have noted before, When Mary Shelley wrote the novel *Frankenstein* (1818), she gave the novel a subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*.

Or consider the play, *Dr. Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe (1592). Faust made a deal with the devil that he would have knowledge and power in his life, and when he died the devil would have his soul. But in the end, he learns what he gave up was more valuable than what he had gained.

And then there's *Peer Gynt*, by Henrik Ibsen (1867). It's about a man who identifies himself through the mirror of the outside world. He wants to be true to himself, that's popular, but he learns that being true to himself is actually a petty self-centeredness. In one scene when he has to look at himself, he finds he is like an onion, one layer after another is peeled away until there's nothing at all, an empty existence which he had lived for himself. (At the end, he is saved by the love of a good woman.)

Adam and Eve, Prometheus, Dr. Faustus, *Peer Gynt* – we are like them. We have the idea that if we're just stubborn enough, just clever enough, we can get around God. The word for that is the sin of presumption. We presume that we can get by. We'll make it. We'll live one world at a time. We'll deal with the next world when we get there. In the meantime, we'll do what we want to do.

What is the Christian answer to this? What is God's justice? God's justice is spelled out in the cross and the cross alone. When we ask: What happens to those who have never heard? The answer is: I don't know. What happens to those who have gone astray? I don't know because God is running the universe his way.

We like to say: "Of course, God is running the universe through the cross, but wink-wink, everyone will be saved." Or we might say: "Of course, God is running the universe, and some will be damned." And the answer is: "No, salvation is by the cross alone and faith alone." And anything else is of the devil, as Luther says (Smalcald, 3/8/10).

Well then, what do we have to hang onto? Is it all up in the air? And the answer again is: No.

We have a promise and we have certainty, as Paul writes in Romans 6:5: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." And in Philippians 3:12: ". . . because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

It's outside of me, in spite of me. And for the rest, I don't know. It's up to God. It's not something where we can say: "It's this, or it's that." That's God's business, not ours. It's not like the general idea out there in the air that finally what salvation is about is good intentions and good works.

Imagine, if you will, that we have a table here today with a pitcher of pure water and two empty glasses. I'd fill both glasses with pure water, but I'd take an eye dropper of sewage and squeeze it into the second glass.

Then I present these two glasses to you. Which would you like to drink? The glass with pure water, or the glass with some sewage in it?

The Gospel is like the pure water. Martin Luther and his colleagues in the Reformation said (paraphrase): "The church is that assembly of believers among whom the Gospel is preached **purely** and the sacraments are administered according to this Gospel" (CA 7).

"Preached **purely**" means like that pure water.

The Lutherans here are reflecting what Paul writes in Galatians 2:5 and 14 about "the truth of the Gospel." The truth of the Gospel or the pure Gospel is that salvation is by Christ alone, by the cross alone, by faith alone.

The only promise that is certain is that the cross alone gives you salvation. What about all those other questions about who is saved? We don't know. We let God be God. We live by faith, not by sight.

And anytime anyone adds something to that – you have to have good intentions or good works, or a conversion experience, or a warm feeling in your heart – that's like putting sewage in pure water. It pollutes the Gospel. It's dangerous. It causes harm. It's serious.

What it's really about is stated well by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Luther is saying the same thing in different words when he says: "The cross alone is our theology."

In our Hebrews text for today it says: "For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands . . . but into heaven itself, now to appear into the presence of God on our behalf" (Hebrews 9:24).

Because of him alone, and in him alone, we have the certainty of salvation. Amen