

By faith alone

Philippians 3:4-11

October 5, 2014

Let's begin with a quiz. I will give you a quote and I want you to tell me if it is from the Old Testament or New Testament.

The Lord is merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love.

It's from the Old Testament, from the Psalms.

Happy are those who are humble; they will receive what God has promised.

It's from the New Testament, from the gospel of Matthew.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.

Both! Isaiah and Revelation.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Again, you can find this quote in both Old Testament and New Testament, in Deuteronomy and in the gospels.

God helps those who help themselves.

Neither! It's not in the Bible. Then why do we hear it so often repeated?

Sometimes, I think, it is meant to be motivational. "Let's get to work! We shouldn't just sit and around and pray and wait for God to do something. God helps those who help themselves!"

Sometimes it's a little bit condescending. "Why should they expect to live on my charity or the government's charity? God helps those who help themselves."

But mostly, I think we say it because we want to think that we have a role to play. We want to think that we have something to contribute to our own welfare, to our own well-being, to our own success, to our own salvation. God helps those who help themselves.

But do we? Do we have something to contribute to our own success, to our own well-being? By all means! But do we have something to contribute to our own salvation? Listen to what the Bible does say:

I no longer have a righteousness of my own, the kind that is gained by obeying the Law. I now have the righteousness that is given through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith.

Righteousness, being right with God, being in right relationship with God, being saved, salvation is not gained, but given. It comes from God, not me. I receive it by faith. I am saved by faith.

For four weeks now, we have been considering different ways of walking the same path. We celebrated a Jewish morning Shabbat service with its emphasis on prayer, on inviting God into the tasks and relationships and routines of our daily lives. We celebrated a Roman Catholic Mass centered on the Eucharist, on connecting ourselves, body and soul, identity and purpose, with the real presence of Jesus. And we experienced together worship in the Greek Orthodox style, with its focus on drama and beauty, on tuning our senses into what is beyond our seeing and hearing and knowing.

These are three distinctly different ways of doing worship. But now, as we continue our series, we will not find such pronounced differences in worship style, with a few exceptions. Worship in the Lutheran and Episcopal traditions is very much the Roman Catholic tradition, both in its emphasis on the Eucharist and in the style and order of worship itself. Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist worship services are quite similar to each other and quite similar to our own style and form of worship. The exceptions will be worship in the Assemblies of God and Missionary Baptist traditions. You will have to wait and experience that for yourself!

The traditions we will be considering for the rest of our series are not so much set apart by distinctive worship styles, but by other things, by differences in theology -- how we think about our relationship to God, by differences in polity -- how we think about our relationship to each other, or by differences in mission -- how we think about our relationship to the world.

How is Christ present in communion? Do we baptize adults only, infants only, or both? How is the church led -- by bishops, by presbyteries, by local congregations, or by inspiration of the Spirit whenever and however it comes? Is mission primarily about saving the lost or serving the least. Or both?

Sometimes the differences seem rather small and quite finely drawn, and yet these differences of interpretation or direction or emphasis have divided the church for centuries, breaking the church up into myriad little pieces, setting Christian against Christian as competitors at best or enemies at worst ... and grieving the heart of God!

Our purpose in doing this worship series, experiencing for ourselves different ways of walking the same path, is to move us in the opposite direction. We are not highlighting differences for the sake of distinguishing ourselves from other traditions, but we are highlighting differences for the sake of enlarging our minds and hearts, for the sake of learning from each other. We want to enlarge our own worship practices by learning to appreciate the beauty and profundity of worship forms different from our own, but we also want to learn from each other, from other traditions, how better to live ...

... to learn from the Jewish tradition how to be grounded, to expect and look for and ask for God's involvement in changing this world, in making shalom here and now, not just biding our time while we wait for the next world.

... to learn from the Roman Catholic tradition how to serve the poor, not just by doling out charity, but by loving and serving and being with, by intentionally seeking out and sharing our lives with those who have a special place in God's heart.

... to learn from the Orthodox tradition how to worship, to tremble in humility and awe before the Holy One, to remember that we live and move and have our being only by and through and in the presence of the One who brought the universe into being and holds it together.

... and to learn from the Lutheran tradition about faith. "By faith alone!" "Sola fide!" That was the rallying cry for Martin Luther and other reformers. They wanted to wake up, bring back, re-form a church they believed had lost its way, a church that had lost the heart of the gospel, the good news, that we are saved, made well, made right, not by our own efforts, not by what we are able to do for God, but by God's grace, by what God does for us.

Paul puts it in unequivocal terms:

But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ's sake. Not only those things; I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him.

For his sake I have thrown everything away ...

We have talked often during this series about jealousy, jealousy that guards closely what it has because it doesn't want anybody else to have it. It is jealousy, in us as persons and as churches, that divides us, that sets us against each other and keeps us from the oneness Jesus intends for us, the oneness that Jesus prays for us. Jealousy -- holding tightly to the things in each of our traditions that we consider most dear, most precious, most us -- keeps us apart!

But what if you didn't hold tightly? What if you counted anything and everything you might once have considered precious as mere garbage? What if you threw it all away? What if you had nothing left to protect? What if you had nothing left to be jealous of?

But why do that? Why would you throw it all away? Listen again!

All those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ's sake.

For his sake I have thrown everything away.

For his sake. For him.

For what or for whom would you throw everything away? For him? For Christ?

As I hear this, I am thinking that "sola fide," "by faith alone," is really the wrong rallying cry. It's not about faith, something I have, replacing works, something I do. It's not about me at all! It's about him! He is worth it! "All I want is to know Christ."

This is what can unite us -- holding on to nothing, being jealous of nothing, wanting just one thing, to know Christ. It's not "by faith alone," but "for Christ alone." Compared to the value of knowing him and sharing his life nothing else matters.

This is what we can learn from the Lutherans. This is what we can learn with the Lutherans and with everybody else. We can learn deep gratitude for what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, and a deep longing for this one thing alone -- to know him.

All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life.

To share in his sufferings, to become like him in his death, to be raised with him from death to life in his resurrection. That's salvation. That's communion. That's eucharist. That's becoming and being one, in Christ.