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Working Out Our Salvation With Fear and Trembling

This morning I want to share a bit of my story with you, which you may or may not have heard. And, I ask that in sharing the gift of my vulnerability, you might share the gift of your grace. Growing up Episcopalian, for me, meant that sermons were often preached at a level far beyond my reach. Sunday School left much of the Bible open for interpretation. And, Jesus was the third part of the Trinity, and that was about all I knew about him. But, as an adolescent I spent almost all of my summers at an Evangelical camp, and in High School at Southern Baptist youth groups and Non Denominational retreats. Where I learned a lot about Jesus. Was never offered the option to question the Bible. And was fairly clear what was said during the sermons (which was often, repent or else). Needless to say, if you know anything of this culture or what I am speaking about you will understand me when I tell you I have walked the aisle to an altar call and said the sinner's prayer, more than a few times.

I will say, some really beautiful things came out of these experiences. My passion for speaking about the gift that is Jesus and his teachings. My desire to share his message of radical hospitality, grace, and love. And, my understanding of a culture that has influenced many individuals' understanding and experience of Christianity. But, some painful things also came out of these experiences. Mainly, disillusioned ideas and all encompassing fears surrounding hell, damnation, and the uncertainties that came with the idea of an if this then that God. If you accept Jesus into your heart then you go to heaven. If you don't then you will burn for all of eternity hell. I can vividly remember being a young teen, curled up on the cold slick linoleum of our kitchen floor, desperately weeping and pleading with God, that I might be spared from the fires of eternal damnation. Because, maybe there was a chance I said the sinner's prayer wrong, somehow "blasphemed the Holy Spirit" (which was more than likely considering I had no clue what blaspheming even was), or because I just wasn't holy, religious (insert good christian descriptive word here) enough.

As I sat there in the throes of a full on panic attack, consumed by the chaos of an overly active, catastrophic thinking mind, my mother came in. And, amidst my embarrassment, shame, and ultimately all consuming fear, she embraced me. She gave me a cold glass of water, sat me down in a chair, and tried to calm me. To bring me back to some form of reality, and pull me out of the depths of my own personal hell that I had inadvertently created for myself. While speaking to a self consumed teen is never an easy task, my mother graciously shared her own tactics for dealing with the unexplainable pains and anxieties of life. Telling me that, when she was feeling particularly down or upset about something, she found comfort and healing by connecting with and giving back to others. Taking food to someone in need of a good meal, calling a friend she knew might need cheering up, reaching out in the community to lend a hand however she might be useful. Encouraging me that looking beyond ourselves and reaching out to others can often bring us the comfort and healing we so desperately need.

There is a word, even more so a philosophy, that comes out of South Africa, entitled Ubuntu. The word literally means "humanity." But, the term can be interpreted as, "I am because we are." Bishop Desmond Tutu refers to Ubuntu as the essence of being human. Stating that, Ubuntu

speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation... [too often we think of ourselves] as just individuals, separated from one another, [but we] are connected and what [we] do affects the whole World. When you do well, it spreads out; it [becomes] for the whole of humanity.” From his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. Martin Luther King spoke to this same idea. As he wrote: “In a real sense all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...This,” King says, “is the inter-related structure of reality.”

Today in our passage from Paul's letter to the Philipians we hear him speaking to a community that finds itself in the throes of conflict. Specifically two individuals, who are in the midst of a seemingly significant kerfuffle. As Paul addresses the community, and how they are to conduct themselves as Christians, moreover as the body of Christ, he tells them: “Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.” Ending our passage as he says: “therefore... carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.”

What if the salvation Jesus came to give us, the same salvation Paul is speaking to today, had nothing to do with walking down an aisle to be saved, or saying the specific words of a specific prayer. What if it wasn't some gift at the end of this long and (frankly) sometimes very painful journey? What if instead it was something that we could experience **together today!** Our own Bishop Curry often talks about the fact that the opposite of love is not hate, but selfishness. Warning that selfishness “will destroy the human race by laying waste to our planet (and our society, I would add). If we let it.” But, I don't think we will do that. And, neither does he. Because love, as an action, has moved us to do incredible things, incredible selfless and loving things. Love as an action calls us to ask the question (Curry argues) “is the decision about me, or is about we.” Because, “love is about living for we.”

As my mother came to me that day, picking me up off the floor. Picking me up out of my despair. She spoke not only to my immediate pain and anxieties, but (whether she knew it or not) to my larger concern surrounding salvation. Helping me understand, salvation is not something we pray to one day experience. Salvation is something we work to achieve together today. Salvation is living into Jesus and Paul's teaching that love, as an action, is not only the greatest commandment, but the only way we will ever save ourselves and our world from the hell we too often create in our own lives. Which I believe is why Paul is so urgent in speaking to his community torn by division. Urging them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. Salvation that can begin when we take on Ubuntu, and look beyond ourselves, asking ourselves, am I living for me, or for we?