

Sermon Lent 4B 2018: Saved for Good Works and Deeds

For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing;

And we are now what God has made us, created in Jesus Christ for good works.

Introduction: First Things First – it is God Who Saves and Not We ourselves

One of the privileges of serving as Rector of St. David's that I cherish and take seriously;

Is the time I spend with families as loved ones are struggling and dying;

And then working with them to celebrate their life on earth

And the greater life God has called them to in God's closer presence.

This is an important and common part of our ministry here – caring for those at death;

And proclaiming the promise of Jesus' death and resurrection

For them and for their loved ones;

And I take part in some way with about forty families and funerals

Over the course of a year, though I am not involved in all the funerals we do.

I was involved in a funeral recently where the family was concerned

About the kind of messaging that we would be sharing at the funeral;

Specifically concerned that we not offer any kind of overt Christian message

That might offend some of the non-believers in the congregation

And especially the young people who were pretty much unchurched.

I assured them that as Episcopalian Christians with our Prayer Book and Hymnal

That we would do everything decently and in good order;

To celebrate their loved one's life and their new life with God.

That all turned out to be true, but so was my little homily that reminded people

That the forgiveness of God and the life beyond the door of death

Are not anything we can accomplish on our own;

These are not things we deserve or can earn by living a "good" life;

But come to us only because God loves us and wants us.

And that that love has been revealed most clearly and certainly
Through Jesus' life and ministry and His saving death and resurrection.

I think most of the family was satisfied with the funeral,
Though I got one or two funny looks from out of town family members
About some of our messaging, but what was most telling were the persons in line
Who told me they had never heard Christianity explained that way before;
And that they would be back – and one has been

Sometimes it's important in the Christian life to remember the right order of things;
Or, if you're just learning what this life in Christ is all about;
Then it's important that you and I have things in the right order;
So that we can grow in our relationship with God;
And draw others into the life we are coming to know.

And the right order of things is this:
You and I are unable to save ourselves from every predicament that comes our way
Or the messes that we create on our own through life;
God saves us.

You and I cannot self-forgive enough to know and live each day
As though we are free from the sin we commit and the pain we create
In our lives and in the lives of those around us;
God forgives us.

You and I do not have the power on our own to forgive all the sins and pain
That others inflict on us and those we love;
We can't let everything go;
God will give us that power and ability to forgive.

You and I cannot earn our way into God's good graces by saying lots of prayers

Or doing anything and everything that deserves God's attention and love;
God loves us already.

And you and I cannot do anything to halt the inevitability of dying and death;
Or dream up some kind of afterlife that keeps us going;
God alone gives life now and God alone gives life after death;
And God gives because God loves us and God wants us.

Your life and mine, the gift of forgiveness and the power to forgive others;
God's love and the reality of life beyond the door of death come from God alone;
And that reality is the right order of things that it is at the core
And the middle and the edges of the Christian life.

It is undeserved, unearnable, this comes to us as free gifts from God;
And it doesn't matter how bad you are or how bad you have been;
It doesn't matter how far your life is from God today or any day;
It doesn't matter whether you are young or old;
God is ready and God is willing because God loves us first.

All we need do is respond to God's love by turning our lives to God, by looking to God;
By believing or giving our hearts to God in some way; by resting in God's promises;
God is offering the way of life and you and I need only respond;
Because God will do the rest.

The Scriptures and the Right Order of Things

The right order of things is what all the scriptures in the Bible are pointing to;
The right order of things is what all the good teaching and preaching through all time
Have been driving toward and seeking to explain;
And that is especially true with the scriptures we've heard this morning
God acts first and for us and we respond.

The strange little story from the Book of Numbers this morning is both an example
Of the right order of things and a prophecy about Jesus.

The Hebrews on their wilderness wanderings are complaining to God about their lives,
Again, and poisonous snakes come among them and start biting them;
They cry out to God to save them and God has Moses affix a snake to a pole;
With the promise that anyone who looks to God's saving offer;
Will be saved from the snakes and from God's judgment.

I say this is a strange story because it is a saving act that doesn't quite fit the need;
Getting rid of the snakes would seem to be a better way to save the people;
But God's salvation is often different than ours
And the act of trust, the act of looking to God in the midst of struggles
Is what really saves and in this case it does.

The prophetic piece is that Jesus, too, is lifted up in the midst of the sin of the world;
And His cross somehow brings forgiveness and lets us know that God will forgive
And that it is God who saves.

St. Paul's letters and especially this piece from the Letter to the Ephesians
Speak consistently to the saving grace of God;
That it is by faith and not by works that we enter eternal life;
That we cannot save ourselves, but only God can and God has.

In the Gospel reading this morning, we enter midway into a conversation
That Jesus is having with one of the more godly, religious leaders in Jerusalem,
A man named Nicodemus, who has come to Jesus seeking eternal life;
Jesus has just told Nicodemus that he must be born again;
That he must receive a new birth from on high, from the Holy Spirit
In order to enter into eternal life now and beyond the door of death.

And here's where we enter into the conversation
As Jesus lays out the right order of things and the entire message of the Gospels
And the life that God is offering in one sentence:

For God so loved the world, that God gave His only and begotten Son to the end
That all who believe in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.

From Jesus' birth, through His life and ministry, His death and resurrection;
Jesus reveals God's love, God's forgiveness, God's promise of life for us.

God sent His Son to reveal the gift from God, the gift of forgiveness and life;
And for all who believe, for all who put things and life in the right order;
The order that begins with God, they will not perish, but have life.

It's about belief first; It's about God first; It's about giving our lives over to God
It's about looking to God first, so that God may work God's magnificent love in us
And through us to others and to a world that is perishing without the promise
And the gift of God.

Now What

The right order of things is a change for most of our lives;
We who have been trying to live this life on our own and by our own terms;
We who have been trying to earn our way, unsuccessfully I might add;
We who have been trying to earn our way into God's graces
Must now take up a different purpose and way of being;
A different way of living.

Oh, we have an opportunity to tell others about this grace that we have been given;
And is available freely to them as well; it's not only for funerals;;
We have a wonderful opportunity to tell others about this love
And forgiveness and life with God now and beyond the door of death;
But as my Dad said to me far too often when I was growing up,
Talk's cheap, let's see some doing;
Or perhaps in more Christian terms, to paraphrase a bit of St. Paul's writing this morning:
For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing;
And we are now what God has made us, created in Jesus Christ for good works.

We are saved, have been saved, are being saved, will be saved by God's grace;
Saved for good works, for doing good, for making a difference;
For loving the world and everyone in it the way Jesus loves the world;
Fully, completely, forgivingly, persistently, and completely.

You are called to live this way in your life;
I am called to live this way in my life;
We are called as St. David's Church to live this way together;
Saved for good works.

You all don't have the time this morning to hear all of the different ways
We can allow God's Spirit to change us and empower us for good works;
But if we will put first things first and give our lives over to God;
You won't need the list that I could come up with;
God will speak to you and direct you and empower you
To do the work God has given you to do.

Not to earn you way, but in thanksgiving that God has shown the way;
And if we will, then we and the world will know of God's love and God's promise
And we will all enter more and more into the life that is really life here;
And one day beyond the door of death.

Amen.