

Sermon for August 10, 2014 (Proper 14, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Title: Lord, Save Me

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

This is one of those famous passages from the apostle Paul that is much beloved among evangelicals and others in the church who emphasize the drama of the moment of salvation.

Are you saved? these folks ask. And when were you saved?

Have you ever been asked such questions by friends who want to make sure that you will go to heaven when you die? Yes, I certainly have.

These fellow Christians want to focus on the moment of heart-felt trust and vocal confession as the point when the saving work of Christ became effective for each one of us, through our appropriation of it.

If you read carefully through this entire passage from Romans, you can get the clear sense that communication is, in fact, the one human activity essential to God’s work of redemption.

Just look at the verbs in this text:

Moses writes, righteousness says, we proclaim, you confess with your lips, everyone who calls.

For Paul, it seems that this entire process is one of communication.

God communicates truth to humanity. We communicate with one another. And then we communicate back to God – which is, in fact, the essential conclusion to the entire process!

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

And so we must communicate. We must call. Together and alone. With God, and with one another, communication is the key to God's redemptive work.

Now, please indulge me for a moment as I tell a story about the importance of communication from our time with Urban Promise this last week.

It was the last week of their six-week day camp program for the children of Camden, New Jersey. Thursday was their "All Camp Day", when the nearly 600 children from 9 different camps across the city come together in a local high school auditorium and have a friendly competition for "The Golden Crate" – a milkcrate spray-painted gold and filled with candy!

At "All Camp Day", each camp receives points for the best costumes, the best camp chants and dances, and for the best performances in various fun competitions.

In preparation for this, Paul and I were asked on Tuesday to create 5 giant jigsaw puzzles (each one roughly a 6 foot square) that were identical so that campers could compete in putting them together on All Camp Day.

So we spent a few hours on Tuesday afternoon searching for large cardboard boxes made of thick, durable cardboard at local businesses. Finally, we figured it would be easier simply to buy 5 large wardrobe boxes from U-Haul. Once we brought these back, we spent the rest of the afternoon laying out the design of two-tone stripes with four circles of different colors on top, all cut in random directions into 16 large pieces.

We returned on Wednesday morning to paint all five of these giant puzzles with some leftover house paint. When they were all dry on Wednesday afternoon, we cut them into the 16 pieces with a circular saw, and collected the corresponding pieces into 5 boxes – so all 5 were ready to go for the big competition on Thursday morning!

You know, Paul and I were feeling pretty good about our masterful puzzle-making project – that is, until the Director of Children's Ministries showed up at the large high school gymnasium on Thursday morning and explained to us, quite clearly, that these puzzles would never work.

They were much too difficult, he said! Then he explained to us that each puzzle was to be put together by one first-grader and one second-grader working together – and that they only had two minutes to do it!

So Paul and I quickly began to modify the 5 puzzles. We duck-taped certain pieces together, and we painted arrows on other pieces to try and simplify the assembly.

It didn't help. When the giant puzzle competition came, and all 600 young people in the gym were cheering and calling for their respective teams to win, and the first- and second-graders were under pressure to put their puzzle together quickly ... they couldn't do it! No one solved our puzzle mystery!

Here is a simple example of a LACK of communication. You see, no one told Paul and me that first- and second-graders were supposed to put these puzzles together under pressure in a maximum of two minutes time!

If we had known that crucial bit of information, then we would have designed them very differently – and saved ourselves a lot of time and trouble, as well.

My friends, it is impossible to under-estimate the vital importance of clear communication in every single human endeavor – including our very human connections with God.

A child needs to hear the words “Happy Birthday” on their special day.
A lover needs to hear the words “I love you” on a regular basis.
I cannot say that God NEEDS to hear from us words of praise and love and thanks, but I CAN say that we need to speak such words to God – over and over and over again.

There is something, however, which I think is liable to be overlooked when we emphasize the importance of our communication with God, and especially among those discussed earlier who focus so strongly upon the moment of our confession.

That crucial question is this: and what does it actually mean to be saved?

Some of you have heard me tell this story of folks who happened to find a snapping turtle crossing a road somewhere in South Jersey.

You know snapping turtles? Big, ugly things that look like the cousins of dinosaurs! Slimy, with powerful jaws that snap your finger off if you're not careful! They can grow up to 30 pounds in ideal conditions.

Well, this turtle they found had a problem. It seems that, when it was a hatchling, the turtle came across a plastic ring from a milk jug or some other plastic container.

Someone must have littered and thrown this into the water, and now this ring became lodged around the center of the turtle's body. It wasn't a big problem when the turtle was young, but when these folks found it, the turtle was likely around 9 pounds and about a foot long. About one-third of the way to its full size potential. This plastic ring has seriously deformed it, so that now the turtle was shaped like a figure eight!

These people astutely realized that the turtle could never continue to grow and survive if this plastic ring was left in place.

So (very, very carefully of course!) they snipped that ring and it fell off.

And what happened then? Nothing! Nothing at all happened. The turtle continued crossing the road. It still looked like a bizarre figure eight. It didn't suddenly, magically, revert back to the normal shape for snapping turtles.

What changed then when these folks cut that ring off of the turtle?

One crucial thing changed. At that very moment, that turtle suddenly had a future.

It had been lost, on its way to a painful and premature death, but now it was found by someone who saw its predicament and who cared enough to do something! Now it was saved.

Like it or not, we are all swimming in polluted waters, and when we were young, we all picked up debris like this. We are all in a system that is far larger than our individual selves, and that system is polluted.

And yes, we like to imagine that we are strong and independent, and that we can free ourselves from the refuse of sin and the debris of life which collects on each of us.

But the truth is that we need help. Help from someone outside of ourselves.

To be saved is to have hope and a future.

To be saved is to be free to become fully alive human beings, radiantly displaying the image and likeness of God!

This is what we hope for and long for in the lives of children living in places like Camden, New Jersey; in the lives of people around the world; and in our own lives.

And you can be that way. You can live like that. Radiantly alive!

The key, my friends, is to ask for help. To communicate.

With others and with God. Once to begin. And then again, and again, and again.

Will you do this, my friends? Will you confess with your lips and call out for help?

Know this to be true: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

May it be so in each of our lives. Amen.