

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, June 9, 2024

Molly said thank you twice, and that that doesn't even seem like enough. It was amazing to see 100 or more kids here all week long and to see the ways in which the organization and preparation had made that so smooth. So to all the volunteers, to all the assistants in the classrooms, to our young people, this morning a particular thanks not only to Molly for leading us in that time with the younger church, but also Ellen and Charlotte and Izzy as well. We are grateful for the ways in which y'all lead us and point us in the way of Jesus Christ. So if you're joining us, perhaps you haven't been here the last couple weeks and if you haven't, we would really encourage you. You can go on our YouTube channel or on live stream even and revisit the sermons from the last couple of weeks—the first two sermons of our summerlong sermon series that we've entitled Theology 101. And we are returning to the basics of faith together this summer. So a couple of weeks ago, Mary taught us on the Trinity, and last week a barn burner for Sin, and then this morning Salvation, okay? We are trying to really remember together collectively and maybe learn for the first time some really important doctrines in our Reformed tradition, maybe reframe some for us so that we can understand how they function in our faith now and in God's world. So today's Salvation—a bit of context before we read together from the Acts of the Apostles, the fourth chapter. Peter and John have in the previous chapter, they have healed a man who is lame from birth. That's what the scripture says, that he was at the beautiful gate there. Actually Joshua preached on this text—on that text—a couple of weeks ago. And they healed this man and all of a sudden people started paying attention to what they were doing and what was going on; and so upon them healing this man, they were detained by the authorities, okay, and they were placed, you might imagine, overnight in jail. And then we get to the text that we'll read this morning—Acts 4, beginning of the 5th verse. I know the bulletin says the eighth verse. We're going back a few more just to make a little more sense, okay. Beginning in the fifth verse of the fourth chapter of Acts—

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (That is, heal the man.) Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are being asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is

*'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.'*

"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen

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Let us pray together.

Spirit, fall fresh upon us once again this morning. Fall fresh and disturb us. Fall fresh and comfort us. Fall fresh and call us forth to be your people. For we ask it in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

I've told this story before, but I like telling it so I'm going to tell it again. Early on in my youth ministry, I wasn't quite an associate pastor yet. They, the people, the good people of Madison Presbyterian Church entrusted me with about 20 young people to go and be a part of this event at Race for the Cure. Y'all are all familiar with Race for the Cure, okay. So this is a cancer event where a group of people, or many different groups, will gather together and they'll walk around the track and they'll raise money. We had one of those in Morgan County in Georgia. And so I took a big group there, and they had told me that all the youth groups that were there and all the other organizations that were there, they would be there all night long. And so I'd set up, and I was ready to be there all night long with this group of 20 kids. It was not according to our protection policies that we have, okay? I should have had like four or five more people there with me, but I was young and dumb, and the church didn't want to show up in the middle of the night, okay? So night falls, and I'm ready for the music to begin and the lights of the track to come on, and instead everyone begins to scatter. Everyone gets in their car and goes home except for the group from Madison Presbyterian Church, because I had told all the parents that we were going to be there all night long—and one other group on the other side of the track from us. A lap is a quarter mile so let's say they were about that far away from us, but you could see the light of their popup tent as well. At this point I became terrified, realizing there wasn't a group of other adults that would also keep an eye on all these kids. One of the more curious of the young people—his name was Jacob. And Jacob disappeared shortly after night fell. That was terrifying, not surprising but terrifying. A couple of hours later Jacob reappeared. I was just about to text his mom and say, “We have an issue,” and he reappeared. This time, though, he reappeared with an even younger Pastor-type person who was with him, who said, “I have some really good news for you.” He walked up to me; he shook my hand; he said, “I hear you're the youth minister for Jacob.” And I said, “I am,” and he said, “I have some really good news for you.” I said, “What's that?” He said, “Just a few minutes ago Jacob got saved.” I was about that quiet too. I smiled and I nodded and I said—and I looked at Jacob—and I said “You did, did you?” I had baptized Jacob or I'd been there at his baptism, upon his confirmation just a few months earlier. He had already been baptized. He had gone through the whole process. He had claimed Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, but now I had in front of me a man of the cloth who was telling me that he had been saved. And so I said, “Thank you so much for letting me know. I appreciate all the hard work you did.” He left and went back to his tent. Jacob sat down knowing that I wanted to talk to him. I said, “What's going on?” And he said, “Listen, they had monster energy drinks and candy, and all I had to tell them was that I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and was covered in his blood.” And I said, “Okay, I can't fault you for that. All right, we're going to be up all night long.”

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The word saved is not one that you hear much in the Presbyterian tradition. It's not one that we use too often. It's...it's beneath the gentility and sophistication of us Presbyterians, we imagine, certainly of us Idlewilders, right? You know, I've been Pastor here for three and a half years, and during a session meeting, which is a group of our elders when they gather together as our leadership body, in three and a half years of meetings, I have never had an elder raise their hand and say "Pastor David, How many people got saved last Sunday?" Not one. It's not a question that you would be used to hearing, maybe, in some of the traditions that you grew up in, even in some other Presbyterian churches, but not so much here. We laugh about it; we joke about it—saved. However, if we are to trust the author of Luke Acts, then it seems that Jesus and the apostles take being saved very seriously, but perhaps in a different way than we might expect. The scene is a kangaroo court of sorts, and Peter and John have done an incredible deed, a good deed as Peter will describe it in the text, and for that good deed they have been detained by the authorities. You can imagine they've slept, or maybe not slept, in the cold, damp rock of the cell in which they spent the night; and then sometime the next morning they're pulled out, and they're lined up, you imagine, with some other folks too. And the chief priests and the scribes, the text says the rulers, the elders, and the scribes, they assembled in Jerusalem, and they gathered all these folks together, Peter and John amongst them. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired "by what power or by what name did you do this?" They have heard about what has happened to the man who for years, his entire life, has been carried to that gate, that beautiful gate, and has begged to be healed; and they have heard that these men have actually done it, and so they want to know by what power. And Peter takes a deep breath in, we call it the holy Holy Spirit, and says to them, "Rulers of the people and Elders, if we are being questioned today about a good deed done to someone who was sick and are being asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the one you crucified, whom God raised from the dead."

Dr. Daniel Kirk rightly observes when we read in the fourth chapter of the book of Acts of the elders and the chief priests and the scribes assembling to hear the case of Peter and John, "we are seeing in real time a confrontation between the powers that would put him to death, Christ, that is, and the power that raised him to new life. Salvation, or Resurrection in this case, is an annoyance to those who would use the power of death in their attempts to snuff out the living presence of God in their midst. Peter and John are instruments of divine power. That is what they are carrying with them on their journey—the ability to heal and raise from the dead."

Well, they use the word heal, that's what the translation says in verse 9, but that might be not the full picture. If you were to spend time going back to the Greek—which I know most of y'all do on Sunday mornings before you come here—you would find that the Greek word for heal is sozo. Sozo. It's often translated as healed, but if you were to take the Greek literally and translate it literally, then Peter's response, or the question that they would ask, that is the leaders would ask, is how has this man been saved? John Mark Comer reminds us Jesus intentionally in his ministry earlier in the Gospels blurred the line between salvation and healing by using this word sozo. The Greek word is sozo, and it's often translated healed, but it actually can mean saved. So that earlier in the writings we—perhaps you know this or perhaps you don't—Luke Acts, we

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understand to be one work with two parts, okay, one author, I should say—a continuation of the story. So there's symmetry between the the Gospel account of Luke and the readings that we have from the Acts of the Apostles, okay. And so when we go back in this writer's telling of the story of Jesus to Luke 8, we hear the story of a woman who for 12 years has suffered from hemorrhages, and she sees Jesus passing by. Y'all know the story, right? She sees Jesus passing by, and what does she touch? She goes and she touches his what? His cloak. And immediately the hemorrhage stops, and Jesus knows that power has left his body. And he turns around; he says, "Who touched me? Somebody touched me." "There's too many people," the disciples say. "We could never know who touched you." And then the woman comes forward, "I touched you." And he says to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well." If you need a little help, "made you well," at least that's how it's translated; but what Jesus actually says to her is, "Daughter, your faith has saved you." Later in Luke in the 18th chapter, there's a blind beggar who is calling out to Jesus over the loud, boisterous crowd that is surrounding him; and the people say, "Be quiet, blind beggar; we could do without your kind around here." And yet he yells even louder to gain the attention of Jesus. And Jesus says, "What do you want?" He says, "I want to see." And then Jesus heals him, and he says "Your faith has made you well," the translators decide. But what Jesus says is "your faith has saved you." A chapter later in the 19th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, there's a tax collector who Jesus sees on the side of the street during a parade. He says, "I'm going to your house to have a meal today, I'm going to your house, so come down from the tree. Let us go." And we don't know what happens in the midst of that meal, but what we do know is that after that meal, this man says that "I'm giving away half of everything I have." He was a rich, rich man. "And if I defrauded anybody I'm going to pay them back multiple times what I have defrauded them." And what does Jesus say? Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house." You can call it getting well if you want to, but the text seems pretty clear. Jesus saves. In Luke there's a sinful woman early on in the story—that's what the text describes her as—a sinful woman, who brings ointment and sits at Jesus's feet and washes them, and everyone is appalled that he would spend time with her or allow her to touch his feet. And what does he say? He says, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

When we talk about salvation, we are talking about something much deeper, much deeper than a single moment in time that procures some monster energy drink and some candy. Salvation is not just about getting back on the right side of God's mercy through judicial acquittal, it is about having your soul healed by God's loving touch.

I'm not sure there's a week that I enjoy more than Vacation Bible School. It's scary for someone without kids to imagine spending many hours in charge of them for a period of time. I'm not a teacher. Many of y'all have spent time in classrooms, but for me it's, on its face, it's an intimidating thing. But what I found out over and over and over is how meaningful that time can be with young people. Vacation Bible School here was a gift. Vacation Bible School back in Madison, Georgia, was a particular gift. One year we had a full Sanctuary just like we had a full Chapel. We had Monday. I forget what the theme was. We had Monday activities, Tuesday activities, Wednesday activities. All the kids were incredible. I got pulled aside Thursday morning. I got a text before this one mother showed up, and then she said, "I need to meet with

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you,” and she pulled me aside before VBS started on Thursday morning, and she said, “I need to tell you something, you're not going to believe it. My son came home last night and he told me he wants to be baptized. He told me that he had gotten saved yesterday during VBS.” I was trying to recollect what songs we had sung, trying to recollect what lessons we had taught. She was from a different tradition—not all that different—Cooperative Baptist. She knew that I'd be skeptical of that type of language, so she kind of leaned in. She said, “He came home and he said, ‘Mom, I need to talk to you, and what I have to tell you about isn't going to make much sense, but I was sitting in the chapel yesterday or earlier today, and it was as if the hand of God came down and reached into my chest and touched my heart and said, ‘You are healed,’ and in that moment it was very clear to me, Mom, that I need to be baptized.” She told me this story. She recollected it, and she said, “He's asked for you to come to his baptism next week.” So I made my way out to a farm about 20 minutes outside of town, to the family farm there, and I was amongst about 50 other people who waded down through the woods to a little creek. And I watched as a young boy about 8 years old fell into the arms of his grandfather, a Cooperative Baptist Minister who had retired, and I watched that grandfather lay his grandson down into the water and then bring him back up. And if I didn't believe in Jesus saving before that moment, I did after. It was one of the most transformational things I've ever experienced in my journey—to have a child say with clear eyes that they had been healed by Christ.

In the Reformed tradition we claim that salvation in Jesus Christ, when we claim that salvation in Jesus Christ, we are saying that through Christ, God heals us. God heals us and not just us, but all of creation. That's the claim of the Reformed tradition. We might have seen it as passe over the last couple decades maybe, but this salvific power has been at work throughout all of history. We might be uncomfortable with the word itself “being saved,” but Salvation has been the work of God from creation's inception. For us, though, the name of Jesus is not a passcode to get into heaven, it is the power for ongoing healing for every sort of human brokenness, right here and right now. So when we talk about salvation, what we are talking about is the ability of the power of God to heal us and make us brand new. That means that whatever ailment you stumbled in with this morning, whether it be of body or of spirit, whether it be of mind or of soul, Christ offers salvation. Or another way of saying it, getting well; or another way of saying it, being healed. Maybe we draw back from it a bit, but I wonder if you were to ask the man who had been lame from birth what had happened to him. I wonder if you went, if the chief priests and the scribes would have gone and not sought out Peter and John to see what power they had used to make this man well, I wonder if they would have gone and found that man and brought him before everybody and said, “What happened to you?” Do you think he would have said ‘They made me well’? I don't. I think if he would have been standing in front of all the people that day, he would have witnessed without any sort of embarrassment. He would have said, “I was saved by these men, and through the name of Jesus Christ.” He would have said, “I was saved by the power of Christ at work in the world.”

Here's my hope for us. When we think about salvation, we don't imagine it to be something that we achieve or enter into some years from now in some distant future, but instead we understand it to be how Jesus described it in the Gospels, and that is a type of healing that can

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take place right here and right now. My hope is that we might know that same salvation that the man who was lame from birth knew, that we might know the same salvation that the hemorrhaging woman knew, that we might know the same salvation that the blind beggar knew, that Zachaeus knew, that the sinful woman knew, that we might know that that same power that was at work in each of those stories is at work in our world now, reaching into our hearts, touching us, and telling us we have been healed. We have been saved. May you know that healing power today, tomorrow, and forever.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.