

Unity in a Broken World

Acts 1: 15-26 John 17: 6-19

Salvation in our society is typically regarded as an individual status or standing. Baptists and their offshoots want to know if you've been saved. Of course, it's an individual matter. Even Presbyterians with their Calvinist-Reformed doctrine of election state a matter of individual standing. Either you are one of the elect or you aren't, election meaning chosen for salvation by God.

No one seems to have any problems with this **me**-centered view of one's right relationship with God. It's perfectly normal and acceptable to measure salvation as an individual item. And it's personal, too. That adds to the singular, monocular focus. Isn't that what Jesus was all about? He was giving individuals the promise of new life and salvation; that's the good news itself, right? And yes, to a certain extent, at the granular level, it is about the individual professing faith and embracing Christ as Lord. Yet in that personal profession, one becomes joined to the body of Christ.

That's usually where we leave it. We are now an individual joined to another individual's promise. It's kind of like being married to someone or being part of a family. Indeed, we may even begin to speak about being with sisters and brother in the family of the living Christ. In doing so, note how we seem to have traversed the boundary from individual identity to shared identity with others. This family or household of the new promise reveals our connection to others. We're related within the body of Christ. And Christ related to all around him as sisters and brothers; they weren't members of anything. They were all part of the human family, of God's beloved.

That's the thing about this promise; we're joined to the promise in Jesus, joined with others who share in that same promise. As we've discussed in prior weeks, relationships are crucial, defining who is in and who is out, deciding who belongs on the branch of the vine, and the kind of friendship that bears fruit with the depth of its caring and loving commitment. Here we are once again, looking at the shared promise connected in relationship.

Here is why the notion of individual salvation is far less important, even bordering on irrelevant, when seen through the eyes of the Lord. Set within the context of being part of the family, the dynamic changes immediately away from individualism as the key value.

Individuals are components of the family, but there is an expectation for the family that the greater good is going to be the priority. It doesn't mean that individuals are ignored or individualism is denied, but that the goodness, health, and well being of the family is uppermost. The family may do all kinds of things, even unequally or seemingly unfairly, in order to achieve what's needed. And everyone shares in the enterprise.

Let's say you have a good life and you're all set, but your sibling is suddenly homeless and destitute. Chances are that you'll sacrifice quite a bit to try to help out your sibling, a good example of sacrificial *agape* love. This happens a lot as folks sacrifice a great deal to give new life and hope to family members. You probably know of folks who have driven themselves to the brink and beyond because a family member has a drug or alcohol problem, but the family is loathe to abandon them to their mistakes and misfortune because, well, it's family.

To do otherwise, to say, 'I've got mine and I'm doing fine, so your concerns are your problem,' would certainly seem unloving, un-Christian, unkind, and unlike any functional family should behave. What good is your satisfaction, your salvation, when your family member is failing? What good is your blessing when your family member is beset? What good is Jesus, the church, the body of the living Christ, when the promise of life is assured for you but life's despair afflicts another member of the family, or you reject and resent their inability to attain to your standing?

The point is that salvation is really a **shared promise**, not an individual attribute. In that sharing, we see that it is also a shared relationship, a shared process, a shared vision, even a shared journey. It is definitely not a particular event, not meant to be coveted as a personal attribute or condition, and becomes nearly irrelevant when regarded in that singular, individualistic way. The life of salvation is experienced in a community of shared witness, while individualistic salvation is almost contrary to the body of Christ.

When we turn to the reading from Acts, we find the earliest church community in a bit of a stew. The author, Luke, does not suggest an attitude of disruption among the disciples, but it has to have been there. Jesus had said his farewell in the preceding verses before his ascension, and the Holy Spirit has **not** yet arrived – Pentecost awaits (next week!). No Jesus *and* no Holy Spirit. The Twelve, those disciples closest to Jesus, seem to be at a loss for what to do exactly. They've been promised the Holy Spirit, but the weeks are dragging by and certain things seem to need attention.

Finally, Peter becomes an advocate for restoring the number of disciples (now apostles) in the inner circle of leadership to Twelve. Lacking Judas, there are only eleven of them. Since Judas's betrayal and departure, they have been incomplete. The missing disciple was evident to all of them. Restoring the actual number to Twelve seems a good idea. That's the way it had been, and it was biblical. It shows a foundational connection to the twelve sons of Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Israel, seen as the conception of people of God. And twelve is a *minyan* – the number of males needed to have a worship service. Twelve seems to be a good and even necessary number. Eleven doesn't have much going for it.

But how do you restore the number to twelve? There is no *Book of Order* to tell you what to do. There isn't any real tradition to follow. There's no Jesus *and* no Holy Spirit. The remaining eleven had to make it up, figure it out. What a mess! What to do?

Peter argues for certain qualifications. The new member of the inner circle of Twelve must be a disciple who was with them throughout the time of Jesus' ministry. Despite the many potential qualifications that could identify the next member of the group, Peter keeps them focused on Jesus and his ministry and their experience together. He expects a participant in their journey together, the shared journey with Jesus. In other words, the right individual was not a person of characteristics, skills, values, or resume. They were qualified only by having been a part of the shared journey. And the office was not defined as 'disciple' or even 'apostle;' the text says this person would be "a witness with us." Notice it is not a witness (solo), but a "witness with us."

They discover that two men fit the bill. This is a bit awkward since now it forces making a choice. How do you choose between two men who are both qualified? Notice how nothing is easy, even the simplest decision. So they prayed about it. After they prayed about it, there were still two candidates and there was still a choice to be made.

Any neat and clean way to make the decision has not surfaced, so they cast lots, or drew straws, or flipped a coin, or did rock, paper, scissors, or whatever, and Matthias emerged as the winner. Who said this shared process together would be easy?

Jesus knew things would be difficult when he left them. His prayer in John 17 recognizes how the disciples had responded with faithful certainty toward Jesus and his claims, how they trusted him and his word. Jesus asks God to watch over his followers as Jesus makes the passage to fulfillment of his ministry and leaves this world.

Jesus is keenly aware that the world's powers have regarded him with hate and loathing because his identity, his being, and his ministry among all kinds of people with his disciples transcended this world and its claims. He knew that such hatred and condemnation would transfer from Jesus to his disciples. His fears for his disciples were real. They were in for a very rough road now.

Make these disciples one with Jesus and one with God, he prays, seeking their blessing, protection, and sanctification. That last word, **sanctification** is important. It means setting them apart for holy, sacred purposes. They are not of the *world*, but of the **word**, and the world hates them for placing their loyalties outside the world. The followers of Jesus, their community of the new life promise, like their Lord and Savior, will have to transcend the grip of worldly powers in order to follow Jesus in his chosen way toward the glory of God.

While these disciples may not be perfect, they have proven themselves to be sufficiently faithful to inherit Jesus' ministry. Jesus prays for his own joy to be received by them as they continue on his way. To them, to us, the promise of Jesus' ministry will be entrusted.

His desire is for their unity together among themselves, in unity with Jesus, and with the sanctified purposes of Jesus' ministry. Their community together faces a broken world in need of healing, and longing for the hope of the new life promise. Being

a group of saved individuals is not the point. Individually, they don't count for much. Together, united, their witness is for the salvation in new life of all.

We don't need to look far for the evidence of the broken nature of our world. The tasks of ministry in Jesus' name remain daunting. Our weakness as churches is that we see ourselves apart, individuals seeking to take care of ourselves, tribes concerned with their own well being, bodies that bear no resemblance to the sacrificial love that indicates a belonging to the family of the new life promise.

We're called, as were the original disciples, to be the community of light, hope and healing. We need to experience those around us, whether in churches or not, whether in Christ or not, as members of the same family of God's love and creation with us, as people who share the journey to new life with us.

That's the way Jesus conducted his ministry, knowing that his journey was to encounter unknown others and make them known to God, to reveal to them God's new life promise. Only with such an understanding can we witness to salvation, to new life, and minister with healing.

Realizing separation and individualism is contrary to the unity of Jesus' prayer and counter to Jesus' ministry to all in God's family, our witness then is to bring about new relationships, new caring, and new ministry. Healing in relationships brings about the new community that strives to bring unity that can heal the brokenness in the world.

The journey is not ours alone. In unity, in solidarity, Jesus expects us to defy the boundaries, discard the accepted divisions, dismiss the narrow theologies of individualism and sectarianism, and embrace the family of God with his love, his grace, and his peace.