

Working it Out
A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – Oct. 1, 2023

Please Read:
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

I had the privilege this week of dining with Episcopalian priest and author, Fleming Rutledge, who I first met in Paris. It was stimulating and inspiring to hear her insights and concerns about the mission of the church today. I asked her one of my standard questions, “What is your favorite summary of the gospel?” to which she responded, “When F. F. Bruce, the British New Testament scholar was asked, ‘What is an Evangelical Anglican?’ he responded, ‘To be an evangelical is *to believe in the justification of the ungodly.*’” Her answer warmed my heart and points to the scandalous good news we hear again in Jesus’ teaching today.

The religious leaders were questioning Jesus’ authority. So, Jesus asks them some confounding questions. Voltaire once quipped that we ought to judge a person by their questions rather than by their answers. Indeed, Jesus turns the tables rather quickly on the hypocrites of his day by asking them hard questions. The parable with its questions is full of irony.

The parable sets up a comparison of two sons. One who says he will do what his father asks, but doesn’t, with one who says he won’t, but does. In one sense, it’s about the simple fact that actions speak louder than words. For everyone who hears this parable the comparison helps us (well, kind forces us) to ask the question, *Which am I?* Am I the son who presents himself as obedient while running around raising havoc, or am I the daughter who to all appearances is the “black sheep” but in the end does what is needed? Which am I? *Which are you?*

There is a tough gospel question implicit in the parable: Some who claim to obey God and observe the requirements of the Law fail, in actuality, to do so. Is this who we are, as believers — as pastors, teachers, church members and Elders and Deacons? Which am I?

There is also a surprising and scandalous gospel reversal of expectations in this parable — those who are seen as the antithesis of the “good” believer, (tax collectors and prostitutes) who have failed to live in the right way, will be given entry to the kingdom of heaven first. Which are we?

The phrase in our Philippians text, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” meets us at the crossroad of these questions. This passage has always been wonderfully perplexing to me. Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian and philosopher, in one of his volumes, *Fear and Trembling*, describes how faith is

fundamentally paradoxical, requiring us to embrace the absurd. Is salvation about *believing* the right thing, or is it about *doing* the right thing? Is it about words, or actions? Kierkegaard would answer, “Yes.”

The scandalous Good News is that *everyone* is beloved of God. Salvation has been realized in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, by God doing for us that which we could not do for ourselves. However, the reality of that salvation has yet to be worked out in our lives and in our world. In hearing and believing that we are beloved of God, we take on new ethical and moral obligations. Each of us who have heard the good news and believe it to be true for us have now to “work it out” in the details of our lives...In our memories. In our work. In our relationships at home and at the office. Believing the gospel is one thing. Living it is another. Yes. We work out God’s love in our personal lives, but we also are called to work it out in the larger community. We can’t say we love God without loving our neighbors, even our enemies. That’s why we care about the poor, the oppressed, the abused.

On this World Communion Sunday, we remember that we live in a world with our fellow brothers and sisters where too many are suffering injustice and inequality. According to World Vision, about 10% of the world’s population, or 828 million people, go to bed hungry every night. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are currently a staggering 110 million people displaced by war or famine. On average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than 10 million women and men.¹ Let us always remember that working out our personal salvation requires that we help to work out the salvation of our neighbors. As Dr. King wrote in his famous Birmingham jail letter, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” The question is, where do we begin?

My friend, the Rabbi Tom Cohen shared the story about a new rabbi eager to change the world. After a few months of beating his head against the wall, he decided he couldn’t change the world... so he would try and change the synagogue. He worked really hard but became frustrated with how the synagogue wouldn’t change. After months of beating his head against the wall, God spoke to him. Now the rabbi is seeking to change himself.

¹ Referenced online Saturday, September 27, 2023:
<https://ncadv.org/STATISTICS#:~:text=NATIONAL%20STATISTICS&text=On%20average%2C%20nearly%20%20people,10%20million%20women%20and%20men.>

Learning to “work out our salvation” takes time and is a process of daily faith and repentance, of dying a million mini-deaths to self so that we might be re-born to the new life of self-giving love and compassion to which God calls us. Paul writes that Christ emptied himself and became obedient. That’s our model. *No ego. No logo.* Learning to be still and listen for God’s voice in our busy lives... It’s counter-intuitive, but rather than trying harder, we need to stop, to rest, to be still and listen to God, laying aside our own motivations and ambitions...

There is this great scene in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* where the sailors are laboring fiercely; and toiling and straining, concentrating on the task. The cosmic conflict between good and evil is joined; chaotic sea and demonic sea monster versus the morally outraged man, Captain Ahab. The scene is full of action and activity. In his boat, however, there is one man who does nothing. He doesn’t hold an oar, he doesn’t perspire; he doesn’t shout. He is languid in the crash and the cursing. The man is the harpooner, quiet and poised, waiting. And then Melville writes, “To ensure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet out of idleness, and not out of toil.”

That’s an amazing line. I’ve never thought of myself as a harpooner, but I wonder if there isn’t a foundational truth here for all of us who would work out our salvation, people who are intentional and purposeful about impacting our partners, families, schools or companies in life-giving ways... Can we patiently say no to that which is not our calling, so that we can say yes to that which is? Can we be still enough to hear God speaking into our lives so that we may start to our feet in action that is healing, loving, and redemptive? Melville recognizes effective action requires listening, and listening requires idleness, quiet Sabbath rest... Yes.

The Good News, finally, in this process of “working out our salvation with fear and trembling” is the promise that “God is at work in us.” We are not alone. That’s the reminder we receive whenever we come to this table. With countless millions of siblings around the world today, we come to receive a bit of bread, a sip of grape juice to remember that God has shown us, the godly and the ungodly, that nothing can separate us from God’s love. And that in faith, even in fear and trembling, we can choose to give ourselves in compassionate and loving service to others so that every single person knows they have a place at the table of God’s love. Friends, God knows the world needs salvation. So do we. God is calling us to be *working it out* together.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.