

My four year-old son Andrew climbed into my bed last Sunday morning and asked me a question. He asked, "What day is it today?" That was his way of asking, "Do I have school today." I said, "Today's Sunday." He replied, "So, no school today." I said, "No school today. Today is a church day." He responded confidently, "I don't have to go to church today. I already know about God." He then rolled over and went back to sleep. I wish I was as confident as he is in matters of faith!

We have before us this morning what is commonly called the Great Commission. It is Jesus' last words to his disciples in the gospel of Matthew. The eleven disciples were gathered together with Jesus. Remember, Judas is no longer in the picture. Matthew tells us that the eleven disciples worshiped Jesus, but that unlike my son Andrew, some of them had their doubts. One translation of the Bible says, "Some were not sure." Now that brings up an obvious question. If these men had spent day and night with Jesus following him around from this place to that place, how on earth could they doubt or not be sure about his resurrection when he is standing right there in front of them? I have talked with people who have made the following comment: "I wish God would just give me a sign – something concrete so I could believe." Well, if Jesus standing in front of his disciples is not a good enough sign of God's power and love for us, then I don't know what kind of "sign" we would want. Why on earth did some of his disciples doubt? I'm guessing they doubted for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the whole absurdity of the entire event. After all, people don't get up and walk out of tombs. When we die, we die. That's it. End of story. So maybe their doubts were well-founded.

Maybe they didn't doubt the physical presence of Jesus so much as they doubted what Jesus had to say to them. That too was equally unbelievable. In effect, Jesus said to them, "It's up to you now. Go and make disciples of all nations – everyone." I can just see Peter scratching his head thinking to himself, "Let's see here – there are eleven of us and you expect us to go out and share the news with everyone?" I think I would have my doubts as well.

But that is what Jesus called these eleven disciples to do – to go out and baptize people and teach them to keep all of his commandments. That is no small task. Do you realize that as Christians you and I have been given an extremely difficult calling and responsibility? We might get confused from time to time in what our true calling is as Christians, but when the rubber meets the road, all of us, you and me included, have been commissioned (sent forth) by Jesus to share the good news of salvation in Christ.

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As with all difficult or nearly impossible tasks, God has not left us alone in this venture. Jesus himself said to the disciples, “I am with you throughout all days until the end of the world.” I cannot think of a more comforting scripture than that. Think about it – no matter what we go through in this life Jesus is right there by our side. Whether it’s the death of a loved one, divorce, relationship problems, challenges at work, etc., Jesus has promised to be with us. Just as Jesus is with us through all the hardships of life, so too is he with us in this incredible calling he has placed on each of us to make disciples and share the good news of salvation in Christ.

Now there is a topic worth talking about – salvation. What does that word really mean? Does it just refer to eternal life in heaven or is there more to it than that? This week I played a joke on some people who came in the office. I was tired and feeling a little goofy, more than usual if you can believe that, and I thought it would be fun to ask people if they wanted to sign up to go to heaven. I told them we had a sign-up sheet in the office for those desiring to go to heaven. I said, “Just sign in at the front desk and your reservation will be secured. You don’t even need to make a deposit!” Of course I was joking. There is not a sign-up sheet in the office for heaven so please don’t rush the office tomorrow morning! The point I was making in a very sarcastic way was this: “Who wouldn’t want to go to heaven?” If that is all that salvation is then why not sign up with Jesus?

Unfortunately, in many of our churches that is all you hear about when the term “salvation” is tossed about. Salvation is set forth as a choice we make on our own as if it is all up to us. It’s as if Jesus is holding a microphone asking us to choose between Door #1 and Door #2 on Let’s Make a Deal. I think there is more to salvation than that. Don’t get me wrong, I believe in heaven and that heaven is a product of our salvation in Christ, but I also think that there is more to this concept of salvation.

It is God who initiates our salvation and it is only through the free gift of God’s grace that any of us have any hope at all, both here in this world and in the new world to come. So doing what Jesus told his disciples and us to do – going and baptizing all in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is really sharing with others the amazing news that God has chosen us and loved us from the beginning and that salvation in one sense can begin in this life. So the burden of salvation is not on our shoulders. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God chose us and claimed us as his children. Therefore, salvation is simply saying, “Yes” to God’s “Yes” to us. God has already spoken and made his decision for us. I believe that is

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the message we need to get out to our community. That is the good news. The victory has already been won for us.

Do you realize what incredible, life-changing news we have been given to share with the world? What other organization on earth can share what we as the church have to share?

Bishop William Willimon told a story about a time he was invited to a small, rural church to baptize a boy by the name of Jeremy:

“Once upon a time I went out to a small rural church to baptize a twelve-year-old boy whom a pastor had been instructing in the faith. I was happy to oblige until the pastor said, ‘Jeremy wants to be immersed. Can you do that?’”

“‘Er, uh, sure. I can do that,’ I said, unwilling to admit that I had rarely baptized anyone by immersion. I arrived at the church that Sunday morning, and sure enough, there was the pastor standing on the front steps with a small boy. ‘Jeremy, this is the bishop,’ the pastor said proudly. ‘It’s an honor for you to be baptized by the bishop.’”

“Young Jeremy looked me over and said only, ‘They tell me you don’t do many of these. I’d feel better if we had a run-through beforehand.’ ‘That was just what I was going to suggest,’ I said.”

“We went into the fellowship hall where the pastor had showed me their newly purchased font, dressed up by a carpenter in the congregation, surrounded by pots of flowers. Jeremy said, ‘After you say the words, then you take my hand and lead me up these steps, and do you want me to take off my socks?’”

“Er, uh, you can leave them on if you want,” I said.

“Well, we had a wonderful service that Sunday. Before I baptized Jeremy, I asked if he had anything to say to the congregation. ‘Yes, I do. I just want to say to all of you that I’m here today because of you. When my parents got divorced, I thought my world was over. But you stood by me. You told me the stories about Jesus. And I just want to say to you today thanks for what you did for me. I intend to make you as proud as I’m going to try to live my life the way Jesus wants.’”

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“Though I’m now weeping profusely (Jeremy asked, as I led him up the steps into the pool, “Are you going to be O.K.?”) I baptized Jeremy and the church sang a great ‘Hallelujah’.”

There are a whole lot of people living in this world who do not know that God loves them, and Jesus has called ordinary people like the disciples and you and me to go and tell them. While we may not be as intentional in our efforts to do that, God working through the Holy Spirit is constantly working in us and through us and through those we meet. That’s another way of saying that God is obsessed with loving us and calling us into relationship. Even with those of us who might have a hard shell to crack, God never gives up on us. God is always pursuing us and loving us, sometimes in spite of how we treat him.

In his book “Who Will Be Saved” Bishop Willimon told about an experience he had with a church member one day. A woman said to him, “Our son has been putting us through hell. We didn’t even know where he was for four months until last night. My husband and I were eating dinner, and suddenly, without warning, he bursts through the front door and begins cursing us, demanding money, refusing to join us at the table. After an ugly scene, he stormed down the hall and slammed the door to his room.”

“Well, my husband gets up, goes over to the kitchen, pours himself a drink, turns on the TV, and slumps down in his chair. That’s how he handles these moments. I walked down the hall and said, ‘Son, can we talk? I just want to talk.’ I could hear him curse me from inside his bedroom. I tried to open the door. It was locked.”

“So I went into the garage, got a big hammer, walked back in, stood before my son’s bedroom door, drew back, and with only one blow was able to knock the doorknob clean off the door. I took about a third of the door with it. Then I lunged at my surprised-looking son, grabbed him around the throat, and said, ‘I’m not going to put up with this anymore. You are better than this! I gave birth to you, went into labor for you, and I’m not giving you away.’”

“I really think something important happened for us last night. I think he heard me. We are on a new track,” she said.

Do you suppose God’s salvation works the same way sometimes? Sometimes we have to be looked in the face and told, “You are better than this. You are a child of God!”