

Defining Words of Faith 9: *Salvation*

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All Saints Sunday

John 3:11-17

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Over the last several weeks, in this season of division and divisiveness in so many areas of public life, we have been reclaiming the common theological vocabulary we share as Christian people. We have called this series the Defining Words of Faith, and considered words like *Incarnation, Forgiveness, Sacrament, Hope, Sovereignty* and *Discipleship*. Words that unite us around God's intentions and encourage us to live into our Christian calling.

It made sense to consider the word, Salvation, on All Saints Sunday since it is a word we use to talk about ultimate things like life, and death, and eternal life. Now sometimes good people of faith think that salvation is only about eternal life. What John's gospel helps us understand is that through Jesus Christ we are saved from death – but Salvation is not just about what happens when we die. Salvation is first about the life of faith before we die.

Among Christians, I suppose this is the most well-known sentence in all of scripture: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* These are comforting words that connect God's love to our faith to the promise of eternal life. They feel personal, reassuring, life-giving, the promise of Easter in a sentence, words worthy of our attention especially on All Saints Sunday when we recall those who now cheer us on from that mysterious realm of heaven. The great Reformer Martin Luther called this verse, "The gospel in a nutshell." And so it is... by the love of God we come to faith, and through faith we believe the promise of eternal life, entrusting our loved ones to God's close company and everlasting peace.

However, when we see these words summarized as simply John 3:16 on a billboard along a highway; or held up in some sporting arena with evangelistic intent to invite personal conversion for the purpose of "being saved," something gets lost. John 3:16 may be the most well known sentence in all of scripture, but it also may be one of the most mis-interpreted or mis-construed. Taking this verse out of context,

as a simple formula for salvation to eternal life, leaves far too much behind. For if you stop at the *everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life* part, then you miss the significance of what Jesus says next: *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Jesus describes Salvation as going far beyond the personal to the redemption of the cosmos. It is not just about what happens to us when we die, it's not just about you and me and those we love, rather it's about the sovereign power of God that extends to the far ends of creation, *for God so loved the world!* The promise of eternal life is not just about eternity; it's life right now, it's the living of our days touched by faith, hope, love, joy and blessing. As my old friend and theologian Al Winn used to say, we are not only saved from, we are saved for.

Being saved from sin and death, we are all saved from self-centeredness; we are saved from hatred toward those with whom we disagree; we are saved from claiming more grace and forgiveness than we are willing to show toward others; we are saved from violence and vindictiveness. And having been saved from those and many other competing claims on our lesser selves, we are saved for. We are saved for the abundant life God offers, for bringing the kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven, for joining Jesus to spread justice, compassion and peace. We are saved for loving God and neighbor, for believing life has a transcendent purpose, for hope that motivates human potential for good.

I look down the list of names that we will remember at the communion table during the celebration of the Lord's supper, and I am grateful that they are saved, that they live among the Communion of Saints, that Great Cloud of Witnesses who cheer us on. As we remember them, let us also think about the many ways they lived their salvation while they were with us: Among these saints are family members who loved deeply and served boldly; who worked for equity and justice; who showed forth compassion and nurtured deep friendships; who enjoyed

the life of faith and created joy for others. I see the names of teachers and social workers, business leaders and homemakers, public servants, generous givers and volunteers who devoted their lives to work for the common good among neighbors and strangers and touched lives in untold ways. I remember so many faces that go with these names as those who loved God with heart, soul, mind and strength.

Are these saints recipients of God's Salvation? Of course they are. But more than that, they are role models for us, in the living of our days, reminders that while we are saved from death, we are saved for a life of faith and faithfulness until all the families of the earth are blessed, because *God so loves the world*.

AMEN.