

"Salvation"
June 7, 2020
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Luke 19:1-10

He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Welcome, church, to the first Sunday of our new sermon series, "Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith."

I started thinking about doing this series about a month ago, when I was on my continuing education and spiritual retreat. I was reading a lot during that week, and I found myself drawn again and again to the beautiful and prayerful writing of Kathleen Norris. She published a book back in 1998 (the title of which I am cribbing for my series!) "Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith." As I read this book again during my retreat, I thought, "This would be an excellent book to use as a basis for preaching this summer!"

So here we are.

A little background on Kathleen Norris: she grew up all over the place (including the exotic locales of Hawaii and New York City), but ended up settling down with her husband in her ancestral home in South Dakota, where her grandparents were from... where her roots were. By the time they had settled in North Dakota, Norris had been away from the church for something like twenty years. But with a return home, with a return to her roots, she also started going back to church.

Having been away for so long, Norris was ready to approach church, including those "churchy words" (like salvation, or conversion, or anti-Christ) with fresh, new eyes. And so she wrote "Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith," where she takes some of these words she grew up on, these so-called "churchy" words, and tries to re-frame them, or imagine them as if hearing them anew.

So that's what I would like to do together with you all for a portion of the summer. I'm going to pick some of my favorite words from Norris' book, and explore with you how we might hear some of these words – words many of us, if we've grown up in the church, have heard all our lives – how we might hear them as if for the first time.

You ready? Let's get to it!

First up: salvation.

What do you think of when you hear the word salvation? (Pause).

I think of my own growing up years, especially my youth group. Some of my friends from my church's youth group (not all) were particularly interested in salvation, in *individual* salvation, I should clarify – like, when everybody, as an individual, was “saved.” My friends wanted to be able to point to one date when it happened, and I so often felt inadequate or like my faith was “less than,” because I could never do that. I could never point to one date when I was “saved.” I always went to church, always believed in God... so, where was my magical date? Was I not really saved after all? I worried a lot about this. I felt afraid sometimes, too.

What about you? I wonder if you had similar experiences growing up.

In the story we read today from Luke's gospel, we hear about a man named Zacchaeus. Luke quickly tells us, “He was a tax collector, and he was rich.” Boo! Hiss! This is about the worst kind of villain there is. But then we learn, almost as quickly, that Zacchaeus wants to see who Jesus is, so he climbs a tree to get a better view.

Well, Jesus passes by soon enough, and somehow, even amidst the crowd, is able to spot Zacchaeus hiding in that tree. “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today!”

The others in the crowd are all mad and grumbly about it, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner,” they grouse to one another. Jesus ignores them, and so does Zacchaeus. And when they arrive at Zacchaeus' house, Zacchaeus is so eager, so repentant even, he exclaims, “Look! Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much!”

Woah! That's amazing. Well, Jesus is apparently pretty amazed too, as he declares to one of the most despised and reviled people you could ever dream up: “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.”

Today salvation has come to this house. What does Jesus mean by that? What does Jesus mean by “salvation”? And why does it come to the *whole house*, and not just to Zacchaeus?

In her book “Amazing Grace,” Kathleen Norris tells a story of talking to a man (she never names him, but I'll call him “Hal,”) who, early on in his life, gets in with the wrong crowd, drinking and snorting crank and selling it, too – drifting around from Wyoming to eastern Montana – but eventually ending up back home in South Dakota. Hal tells her about falling in with a guy back at home whom he always respected because he was experienced in the drug business, so Hal is starting to think things will be okay now. He's still selling drugs, but at least he's home, and partnered with someone who seems to know what he's doing.

But one day, as the two are driving on the outskirts of a small city, Hal's friend veers onto the shoulder of the road. Norris writes,

He [Hal's friend] had seen an acquaintance driving past in the other direction and was debating whether to turn his car around and follow him. ‘I need to kill him,’ he said matter-of-factly, reaching for a gun that [Hal] had not known was stashed under the front seat. ‘I need to kill him, but he's with someone, and I don't know

who. So it'll have to wait. [Darn]. 'It was then I decided to get out,' [Hal] said. 'This was over my head.'¹

Norris goes on, "And that is salvation, or at least the beginning of it."² She reminds us that the Hebrew word for salvation means "to make wide." To make wide. Hal had realized that the road he was traveling on was not wide enough to sustain his life. The road he was on was too narrow, and was getting more narrow all the time, and there was no life there.

Let that sink in for a moment. What if salvation is not so much about going to heaven when we die, but is about walking a road here on earth that is wide and good and full of things that bring us life.

That would certainly be the case for Zacchaeus. He was on a narrow road before he encountered Jesus – one of greed, of only taking care of #1. But Zacchaeus meets Jesus, and he is changed. The road before him widens, tremendously, and suddenly he is concerned for the poor, for those he has defrauded, for those on the margins. He is saved. The road he is walking on opens up, widens, and the small and narrow and sad and lonely life he had been living is no more. Death has been swallowed up. Zacchaeus' death-dealing choices and lifestyle have widened into something bigger and more inclusive and probably more beautiful than Zacchaeus could have ever imagined.

Salvation.

One more thought about salvation. Earlier in my sermon, I had posed the question, "Why does salvation come, not only to Zacchaeus, but to his whole house?" To get at this question – to understand salvation as a communal grace, as opposed to an individual grace – we first have to start to change our thinking around sin.

Just as my well-meaning friends from my growing up years understood salvation to be about the individual, so did many of them understand "sin" to be about the individual. And they are not totally wrong – we do sin, and act in sinful, narrow ways – as individuals, that's true. But we can stuck thinking that that is the only kind of sin there is.

And, church, I believe that our Black and Brown sisters and brothers, in this very moment, in this very season, are pleading with those of us who are White to start thinking about sin a little differently.

Sin is not only found on the individual level. Sin is just as much – if not more so – found on a communal level, on a societal level. Sure, you yourself may not be "racist," but the world we live in, the air we breathe, the systems that we have put in place – all of this is based on the model that black bodies are not as valuable as white ones. I'm not going to quote statistics at you right now, but please believe me when I say that our country is not set up to be fair or just for people of color. It just isn't. And that, my dear, faithful, church, is our communal sin – a narrow path that leads only to death – one we all participate in together.

So, what can we do about it? How can work to "widen" this narrow road of white supremacy and white privilege that we all of a part of, including me?

Our brothers and sisters of color are pleading with us to find salvation, to walk the way of life for all people. And I think it begins with listening to them. Listening to their

¹ Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), pp. 19-20.

² *Ibid*, p. 20.

stories of what it is like to be black or brown, what it is like to have to start talking to your black sons when they are Wil's age or younger about strategies to avoid upsetting police officers who might take your life, just like that officer did with George Floyd. Or maybe we can listen to what it's like to be a person of color in this pandemic, with black and Latino communities experiencing so much more exposure to COVID19 than their white counterparts. Why is that happening? What are the stories? What does it feel like? White people, we need to listen.

I do want to witness to a group of folks who I think did this so beautifully and dare I say, faithfully, last Sunday night – the Des Moines PD. Many of you know how the Des Moines police, last Sunday evening, took a knee in solidarity with those who have been killed or violated because of the color of their skin. It's a powerful image – and if you haven't seen it yet, please Google it – these officers kneeling like this. It's not perfect of course; it won't solve everything; but it's a step. These police officers were listening. And they acted. And the path was widened, if only a little bit. Salvation was near.

Shutting our mouths, listening, taking seriously the stories and experiences of people of color, and then acting in humility, confession and courage – this is what our God pleads with us to do. Our God – the God of the prophets, the God of justice, the God of peace, the God who is made flesh in the brown skin of Jesus, is pleading... and leading us to salvation: to the path of life, a wide and open path, a beautiful path, a path of justice for all of God's people.

Salvation. Will you go there with me? Can we walk in that wide path, together? Can our house be saved?

Thanks be to God.