

6-20-21

Pentecost 4

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Now!

Now is the time. Today is the day of salvation!

Those are stronger words that you are accustomed to hearing from this pulpit, whoever stands behind it. Our approach to preaching and worship and evangelism tends to be different than what we might expect to hear in some other places. That is not to say that ours is right, and someone else's approach is wrong. But we generally tend to take things a little slower. Let people grow into their relationship with God. Give people time to understand that relationship before asking them to make a commitment to it. We saw the fruit of that a few weeks ago when Lydia and Natalie stood here with me and told you and all the world that they believed the things we had been teaching them since they were babies, and now they wanted to join us in professing their faith as members of this church. The part of that process that you witnessed that morning didn't take long. I called them up here, asked them some serious questions that they had been told to prepare for, and they answered them appropriately. Many of you joined me in welcoming them at the door. What some of you didn't see was a process that has been going on since those girls' parents brought them here when they were babies. They left them in the nursery with Miss Pat for those first few years, and no one could have loved and cared for them more. In time, they outgrew the nursery, but they never outgrew being loved by Miss Pat. They went to Sunday School, most of the time with their grandmother as their teacher, it turns out. Again there, there could not have been a more loving environment for them to learn who Jesus is and why he matters in the lives of two little girls in Southwest Mississippi. They came to Vacation Bible School for years and, I suspect we'll recruit them to help with that now that they've aged out. In time, they grew into other forms of Christian education. Before Covid changed the

world, they were part of youth activities, and they will be again when we get things cranked back up. The Presbytery is working on a back-to-school event for youth across our region, and I hope they'll be part of that when it happens. The girls had met with me for six weeks or more back in the spring on Sunday afternoons. We talked about lots of things: Scripture, how the Church works, what's distinctive about how we do things, why it's OK that others do them differently, why worship is important, why that looks different here than it does other places, the Sacraments, how we reach out to others—if you know them, you know they had things to say about all that, meaningful things. We got out the big official book where their baptisms are recorded and showed them the record of that event. They were here, but they don't remember it. Their family has shown them pictures and told them stories about it. We talked about how that, and the fact that they were born to believing parents started all this. They spent time with some other adults in the Church, too, figuring out why all this stuff is important as they figure out where their lives will take them in the coming years. Then they met with the Session. They were a little apprehensive about that. The Book of Order says that the Session has to examine them before they can become members of the Church. Most of the members of our Session have been examining these girls for years, so the exam in that meeting was more joyful than rigorous—as it should be. And then, after all that, they stood here with me and answered yes when they were supposed to say yes, and I will when they were supposed to say I will.

None of that was as dramatic as Paul makes it sound when he tells the Corinthians that now is the time and today is the day of salvation. We even talked with the girls about the possibility that friends of their might challenge their experience because it doesn't match theirs. As Mr. T. might say, I pity the fool who tries to tell these girls that they're not real Christians!

Today is the day. Now is the time. That language has a sense of urgency that fits better in a revival or evangelistic setting, I guess, but that's not the context in which Paul speaks at all.

Like our decent and in order process, he was about something much more mundane than that.

All is not well in Corinth. Those among us who have more than a cursory knowledge of the New Testament know that we have two letters from Paul to the Corinthians. A careful reading of those letters will show us that there was at least one other letter that we don't have. Paul had written a letter to address some issues in the Church that many didn't want to address. We don't know for sure what those were, but we know that that letter was not well-received. Some there invited Paul to come and talk with them about all that, and he agreed to come, but wasn't able to get there when he promised he would come, and that set off a firestorm of criticism, mostly of Paul. It is in that context, not a pleasant one, that Paul reminds people that salvation is the primary reason their church or any other church exists. He pleads with them to ease up on the criticism, not just because most of it is directed at him, but because it diverts too much of their energy and enthusiasm from what they ought to be about.

The portion of the letter we read this morning starts with some ominous words. We urge you, Paul says, not to accept the grace of God in vain. Those are words that call us to slow down and think about. What might it mean to do that, to accept the grace of God in vain? Let's go back to our two girls and see if their experience can help us.

Those two girls' lives have been lived with grace as a foundation. From the first time their parents brought them in this building, they have lived surrounded by the grace of God, made known to us most clearly in Jesus Christ. From Miss Pat in the nursery to the day they stood here with their parents to receive baptism, grace has been the foundation for everything else they have learned. The idea that God loves them and will love them forever has been drummed into them since before they could let anyone know they understand it. The hope of all of that was that one day they would come to understand that grace as a foundation for their lives and find ways to share it with others. And a few weeks ago, we all saw that happen.

I promise that none of us involved in that process with them has been following them around since that Sunday to be sure they're behaving like people who have been redeemed by the grace of God. Their parents and grandparents may have, but that's family business! All of our hearts swelled a little that day when they stood here with me and made promises to believe. That's about as revivalist a day as we Presbyterians tend to have. Some of us are already looking ahead at the crop of kids that will come next in that process and thinking about how it will feel to see them take these steps, too. And, even though we won't follow and snoop around, we have expectations of them. We want to continue to watch them grow in their understanding of those promises they have made. We can't wait to see what God has in mind for them in the way of learning and careers and relationships and living faithfully. We want some church somewhere to benefit from their leadership gifts one day. Maybe here. Maybe in some other place God will call them. But we want these things we have learned and taught and experienced together to take root in their lives. To use Paul's language, we don't want all this to have been in vain. We want the grace of God to be foundational to their lives, whatever else those lives wind up including.

All of us here can look back through our experience in the Church and conjure up images of other kids just like these that we had some hand in forming. And we can think about how their faith has become foundational to their lives. I'm thinking of two kids from our Alabama years in particular. Deanna taught one of them music in preschool and then both of them in Sunday School. They went on youth trips, mission trips and other kinds with us for years. They're both adults now as hard as that is for me to acknowledge. One of them is married and a parent. The other one I'm not sure, but I suspect so. We don't see either of them anymore, but I know that their faith continues to be an important part of their lives. They did not receive it in vain. It became the part of their life that it was supposed to be, and it continues to mold and shape who they are.

That's what Paul wants for these folks in Corinth and for all of us who read his letter after all these years: to understand that the ministry of the Church is never about playing games, getting our way, or winning an argument. The ministry of the Church is about salvation, about bringing people into a relationship with Jesus Christ that will change their lives and their outlook on the lives of others forever.

Paul is one of the most controversial figures in the New Testament. It's easy to find all kinds of reasons not to like him. He doesn't even always agree with himself. That's one of the many things the Corinthians criticized him for: he was never as consistent as they thought he should be—he said one thing in one setting and another in another. You heard how defensive he got in what we read this morning—all that talk about all the things he had tried to do among them to proclaim the Gospel, things they could never quite appreciate. Paul's defensiveness is one of the things many people have trouble with. But you know how you react when you're backed in a corner. Paul came out swinging sometimes when he might have been quiet. But he was all in in this business of ministry, and you know that committed people are eventually going to tick someone off.

I've told some of you before about the hard time our younger son, Kyle, had with a particular friend when they were in high school. The two of them were great friends. But that friend went to one of those now is the time, today is the day kinds of churches and he believed what he was taught there and that meant that he just wasn't sure that Kyle was as saved as he needed to be. The story is too long and, frankly, too painful to tell here, but just know that it got ugly a couple of times. But Kyle never stopped caring about that kid, even when he assaulted the very ground of his salvation. Kyle had been taught that our call is to love one another with the love of Christ and that that love will do the work of salvation and hope. And he believed and believes that. Today those two are fast friends and will be forever, I suspect. The love of Christ healed what might have broken them, and the love of Christ sustains their relationship now. You know

you can't make these stories up, but that kid is now all grown up and married and a parent now. And his family belongs to a Presbyterian Church! Not our brand of Presbyterian, but at least he outgrew the judgmental, narrow brand of faith he knew before.

I'm not sure the healing those kids experienced ever happened between Paul and the Corinthians. But Paul shared that hope with them, and calls us to share it with one another. Whatever else might divide us, today is always the day of salvation, and the Church and its people must be in the salvation business. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Gracious God we know that we do not always know how to pray as we should, so we are grateful that you sent the Holy Spirit to pray for us when our own prayers won't come. In this confidence and in the assurance that you love us in spite of our failings, we ask you to hear our prayers this day. We pray today giving thanks for this place where you have placed us to live and asking you to show how to care for it so that those who come after us will live surrounded by both beauty and plenty as we do.

We pray today for the people of the world, those who live alongside us here and those we will never know who live lives much different than ours. Show us all how to glorify you wherever and however we live. We pray for those who live under the rule of tyrants, that they might find freedom. We pray for protection for those who live with disaster and war and famine and all the other things that come from the rule of tyrants. Help us find ways to both know and share peace. We pray for healing, especially in places where this virus continues to rage. We give thanks for the generosity of nations like ours who commit to share vaccine with those who cannot provide it. We pray for that day when we will all be free from this pestilence. We pray today for our city and our neighborhoods. Heal our divisions. Help us to know one another and to live together with each other's interest at heart. We pray for our country, for those who lead us and for all of us who seek to follow. Give wisdom to those who govern us. Keep safe those

who protect us from danger here and on distant shores. Help justice to flow forth from us. We pray for the Church, even for this church, today. Sustain all who do your will and give us renewed energy so that we may offer new life and hope to all who pass our way. Be close to those in our community who are sick. Bring healing and show us how to show compassion while we wait for it to come.

We pray today for all who are fathers, by biology or by choice. Give all who share your love with children of every age the grace to love their children abundantly and wisely, embracing when that's what's needed and giving space and freedom so children can find their own way.

We believe, O God, that your love, the love you call us to share with one another is stronger even than death. Even as we continue to mourn those who have gone ahead of us into your presence, keep us connected to them in faith until that day when we will all feast together in your kingdom.

We pray all these things, Loving God, in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us all to pray when he said: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*