

"SAVED FROM OURSELVES"

March 10, 1991

TEXT: Ephesians 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. . . ."

Not long ago I read about a jumbo jet which made what can only be described as a miraculous landing. Everything seemed normal enough until the pilot discovered that his landing gear was jammed. After trying everything he could, he dumped his fuel and came in for a belly landing. In the meantime, the ground crew had spread the runway with foam and fire trucks and ambulances were stationed near by.

The plane screeched along the runway, metal against concrete, and finally came to a stop. Miraculously no one was hurt. As the passengers left the plane, one of them, a priest, said to the flight attendant, "Remember, the rest of your life is extra." That is pretty good theology, but she did him one better. She quickly replied, "It's all extra, Sir, from the very beginning."

She was right, of course. It is all extra. From the very beginning. Everything we have, everything we are, is the gift of God's Grace. A Grace that goes far beyond anything we ever deserved or even dreamed of. A Grace that not only gives us life in the first place, but which finds us and redeems us when we have lost our way. It's that Grace I'd like to talk about this morning.

Specifically, I would like to talk about Ephesians two, verses eight through ten, which says: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God --not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them."

One of the things I like about those words is the way they really summarize the Christian faith. Most of us need that. Ask a Communist what he believes in, and he will tell you in so many words. But many Christians can not do that. They know only vaguely what they believe.

I think, for instance, of the time Calvin Coolidge went to church alone because his wife was sick. When he got back home, she asked him what the minister had preached about. And Coolidge, who was known as a man of few words, replied, "Sin."

"Well, for heaven's sake." Mrs. Coolidge protested. "What did he say about it?" And Coolidge answered, "He was agin' it." Now, that makes a good story but a poor foundation for faith. What I like about our text this morning is the way it condenses the Gospel into three points we can all remember. 1) "By grace you have been saved. 2) It is the gift of God. And 3) We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works"

The first point tells us we have been saved. Saved from something very real and very dangerous. Saved from something in ourselves which theologians call "sin." I realize, of course, that main-line Protestants rarely talk about sin these days, much less about "being saved." Conservative Christians have used those terms so frequently, and sometimes so distastefully, that they make us feel uncomfortable. But, uncomfortable or not, sin is real. And Karl Menninger, a psychotherapist, not a theologian, insists we need to rediscover the concept if we want to be really healthy.

Perhaps it would help if we did not always think of sin in connection with wickedness. Consider, for example, Ephesians, chapter two, verse one, which speaks of the "trespasses and sins in which you once walked following the course of this world." In Greek that word "trespass" is hamartia, which comes from the world of archery. Instead of some great evil or terrible wickedness, it simply means to "aim at a target and miss."

And the word for "sin" is paraptoma, a term often used by hikers. It means "to slip and fall" or "to lose one's way." So sin might be nothing more than those slips and misses that plague us --not because we are wicked and evil-- but because we follow "the course of this world" instead of God's way. It does not have to be something like murder or adultery. It may just be, as the prayer book put it, that "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done what we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us"

Here we see, not only what sin is, but also where it leads. "There is no health in us." Even when it consists only of slips and misses, sin ultimately leads to un-health and dis-ease. That is why Paul tells us that "The wages of sin is death", why God said to Adam and Eve, "On the day that you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, on that day you shall surely die."

That does not mean we will be hit by lightning bolts every time we do something wrong. But sin kills just the same. Here is a boy or a girl who has abused God's sacred gift of sex. Or a businessman who has cheated on his income tax. Or a student who has turned in work done by someone else. Do we really think they can do those things without killing something deep inside?

Here is a man who goes through life always looking out for number one, never caring about anyone else. Has he not already killed the person God intended him to be? There are many sins

that may not kill the body. But what about innocence? What about ideals? What about relationships? What happens to them?

Think about the story of Adam and Eve. Before their Fall, they related to God in perfect innocence and child-like love. Then they disobeyed God --and what happened? The next time they heard Him walking in the garden they were afraid and hid from His presence.

Or, if you prefer, consider this letter sent without signature to the Department of Internal Revenue. It said, "Gentlemen: Enclosed you will find \$150. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not slept well since. If I still have trouble sleeping I will send you the rest." We can laugh, but sin does kill. It kills innocence. It kills idealism. It kills relationships. The Gospel openly admits that and shows us how to deal with it.

That is where Grace comes in. The Gospel is not just another self-improvement scheme. Try as we might, we can not save ourselves. Our innocence gone, our ideals damaged, our wills impaired, how could we? We are like swimmers caught in a powerful undertow. Try though we might, we find ourselves swept farther and farther out to sea. If we are not to drown, other hands must bear us up, other arms must pull us to safety.

In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son. Sent Him to save us from guilt by making God's Grace so clear, so convincing, that you and I might dare to live the way God calls us to. Sent Him to save us from sinning again by pointing out the right target and God's better way. It is the gift of God.

And, because it is a gift, should we not be thankful to the One who gave it. Let us go back to that analogy of the swimmer. Suppose you really were drowning. Frightened out of your wits, you find yourself going under. But then, miraculously, strong arms pull you back up to the surface. Skilled hands administer artificial respiration, and, finally, you are breathing on your own. Your eyes open, your wits begin to clear, and you see the person who has saved you.

What do you do then? Would you ignore him? Would you get up and go back into the water again? Or would you thank him? You know the answer to that as well as I do. You would not only thank him with words, but you would also try to show how grateful you were.

In the same way, if we take seriously the concept of human sin and God's salvation, then we will want to show how grateful we are. Not just in words, but in a new, more meaningful way of living. And this morning's text tells us how we can do that, for it reminds us that we are saved for a purpose.

It says, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God had prepared beforehand that we should

walk in them." We Christians are not only redeemed sinners. We are people called to a task. A task that is more than just duty. One that is also a way to show how thankful we are.

In China, it used to be that, if you saved a person's life, he or she belonged to you. In a way it is rather like that with us. Out of gratitude we join God's lifesaving team. We begin to help others just as we, ourselves, have been helped. Perhaps we will give some of our time and money to our Habitat for Humanity Project so some poor family can have decent housing. Or we might sing in the choir or teach Sunday School. Or we might join the Partner Program and call on a lonely shut-in. Or we might become a Laubach tutor and teach some struggling adult how to read.

Opportunities are all around us. Ways to make God's love so real, so believable, that others will be willing to trust it, too. Ways to prove --both to others and to ourselves-- that God's way of love is more rewarding, more fulfilling, than the world's worship of self. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works."

The next time someone asks you what Christianity is all about, you can tell them, "That's easy! It's about saving the world from its own selfishness. It's the gift of God in which we help because we are grateful --and because we have been created in Christ . . . for that purpose."

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