

Sermon: Salvation Entitlement

Lesson: Acts 9:36-43

Lesson: John 10:22-31

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Not too long ago, I was taking my daughter Elizabeth to school when we were caught in some slow traffic. I realized that the lane to the right of me was both clear and open for straight traffic up to the intersection where I needed to turn. I shifted to that lane, only to find as I approached an intervening intersection that a car had turned right on red into the second lane, effectively blocking my lane with its green light. My irritation was alleviated a few seconds later when traffic resumed moving, and the interloper car was able to clear my lane. Before I could move ahead, a second car also turned right on red into the second lane, again blocking my progress. This time I tapped on my horn, both to alert the driver to his mistake, and with a faint hope that he would back up and let me pass. I was a little surprised to have the middle-aged driver glance at me, then cast me the obscene hand gesture of dismissal.

I fumed about this for a little while – carefully editing the sticky poster I planned to print up for the next such occasion. I imagined myself printing a pile of these posters: “BEWARE! A driver in this car feels entitled to the road, regardless of traffic laws or the convenience of other drivers!” I could hop out of my car, dash over to the offender, slap the poster on the side of the car and dash back to my own. Satisfaction!

Of course, I will never print the posters, or put them on the cars. To do so, in this day and age, might result in being shot. However, my fuming and planning did serve another purpose than just releasing my frustration over the inconsiderate drivers.

I began to think about all the ways in which we feel entitled, even –or perhaps especially – with regard to God. And as I read this week’s Scripture passages I realized that feeling entitled is not a new phenomenon.

In the reading from the Gospel of John, the Jews in the temple demand to know plainly whether or not Jesus is the Messiah. They feel entitled to a clear yes or no. Yet as Jesus says to them, they have seen what he has done, and yet they do not believe. Even when he tells them outright that he and the Father are one, they take up stones against him. These leaders feel that they are entitled to stay with their own opinion no matter what evidence is given them. And they are equally convinced that Jesus has no right to make the claims which he does.

We could sit in judgment on those stubborn leaders in the temple, or we could admit that we are just as susceptible to this attitude of entitlement as were those ancients. We like to think that we would not reject Jesus or God’s plan for salvation, but we need to consider how we might be claiming some false entitlement within our salvation ; how we might be rejecting the entitlement of God far too often.

To just what *does* our salvation entitle us? We might think we are entitled to good health and a successful life. Don't think we do this? How many times, when something bad happens, do we wonder – Why me? How could God let this happen to me?

Likewise, when we baptize our children, how often do we faithfully fulfill our baptismal vows to bring those children up in the love and nurture of the Lord, within the fellowship of the Body of Christ? Or do we act as if baptism is somewhat of an entitlement talisman, keeping our children safe for eternity, requiring little or no follow up commitment on our part or theirs?

Just one more example, how many of us presume that the Church will always be there – whether or not we do anything to help sustain it? We come occasionally to worship, expect high quality worship especially on Easter and Christmas, want to belong to a church that does mission work and education, but beg off serving on committees or boards, teaching Sunday School, or other activities, leaving these things to a core group of people who, for some reason, we think have more time than we do. We feel *entitled* to have the church there when we need it.

I will admit right now that there is a problem with preaching a sermon like this – most of the people who need to hear it aren't here. However, I think all of us need to think a little about what *we* take for granted, to what *we* feel entitled, and what our salvation *really* offers to us.

Salvation does not guarantee any of these things – good health, success, or even the continuance of a congregation. Salvation gives us something much more. We learn something of this in the story from Acts.

In our reading from Acts, a good and generous woman dies. Those who loved her learn that Peter is not far away. They send word to him to come quickly. Peter comes. The women who had cared for the body, and loved the woman, Tabitha or in Greek Dorcas, show Peter all the fine things that Tabitha had done. They do not ask him to raise her from the dead, though it may have been an unspoken hope. Peter sends everyone out of the room and then prays. He turns to the body and says, “Tabitha, get up.” The woman rises and is restored to her friends.

This might at first appear to prove the very thing I have just been saying is *not* our entitlement. In fact, it offers something very different.

I find it interesting that Luke, the author of Acts who wrote in Greek, mentions the Aramaic translation of Dorcas' name – Tabitha, and then uses the Aramaic name in Peter's command to rise. “Tabitha, get up.” In noticing this, I was reminded of another story of the raising of a woman from the dead. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we find the story of Jairus' daughter. In this story, Jesus is at a distance from the home of Jairus when Jairus comes to seek help for his ailing daughter. Before they can reach the home, word comes that the daughter has died. Jesus reassures Jairus and continues to the home. He puts everyone out of the room except the parents, and then calls to the girl to get up. The girl rises and is well. Does this sound familiar? Luke just tells us that Jesus says, “Child, get up.” Mark give us the Aramaic of this statement, “Talitha, cum.” Talitha, Tabitha, get up. These two words had to ring a chord of recognition in the ears of the earliest hearers of these writings, and can to us. In this miraculous

story of the raising of Tabitha, we learn that the saving work of Jesus Christ continues through the lives of those whom God has called to serve.

If we are entitled to anything from salvation, in addition to forgiveness of our sins, it is to serve with Christ in the work of God in this world. We have the privilege of proclaiming God's grace, mercy, and righteousness. Salvation entitles us to work alongside Christ, reaching out to the hungry, the homeless, those who mourn, those who need hope. We are entitled to join in this ministry no matter what the circumstances are in our lives. What a remarkable privilege, and responsibility!

The crucified and risen Lord promises to be with us through all that we are called to do, but also reveals that the call we have will not be easy. We *are* promised that the Holy Spirit will lead us and sustain us in this life of salvation, so that our response does not have to rely on our skills or strength alone, just as our salvation itself comes from God alone, not through our righteousness or efforts.

Joan Gray, former moderator of our denomination, in her book Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers, which the Session is studying this year, reminds us that the Church is holy not because the people in the congregations are holy, but because God has made the Church and makes it holy. We are called to live into that holiness. The privilege and responsibility of living into God's holiness is a precious gift never to be taken for granted, never to be spurned for some mistaken sense of entitlement to other things. Gray also notes that the Church, *as it is called to be*, is sometimes difficult to see. (Gray, 66-67, 73)

Too often we in the Church act instead like my family cat. Our cat, Sparky, comes up to my bed each morning, desiring to be pet. He will come up close, but when I reach out to pet him, he will stroll just to the limit of my reach. When my arm drops – because I do refuse to stretch further – Sparky will look at me with a gaze that accuses, “Why did you stop?”

God reaches out to us long before we even consider hopping up to approach God. God envelops us with love, comforts us, and directs us in the right direction. Yet we feel entitled to go our own way. We stray, and then wonder where God has gone.

Daily, God is calling to us, drawing us closer to God, setting before us the work of Jesus Christ which we are to share. Daily, God calls us not to shun the grace which God gives us, the grace of the freedom from sin and the grace of sharing in God's work in this world. Daily God calls us to claim our inheritance, our entitlement, to share in this ministry – to let go of all those lesser things to which we feel entitled, and to hold fast to the grace of God's salvation. There is no greater entitlement.