

“Who is your Savior?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
March 12, 2023

Romans 5:1-11 and John 4:5-26, 39-42

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Imagine a place where you can fly. In fact, you can do anything you want: read books, eat ice cream, dance with your soul mate, open a restaurant, go sailing. You live in a house calibrated to every nuance of your personality. It’s Heaven. It’s the Good Place. When you arrive, you’re told, “You know the way you feel when you see a picture of two otters holding hands? That’s how you’re gonna feel every day.”

The question is: How do you get there? In the comedy show “The Good Place,” there’s an angelic bureaucracy monitoring your every action in life, judging its goodness and badness. When you die, you go either to the good place or to the bad place based on how much good and bad you did in your life. As one intergalactic accountant explains, “Every action by every human on Earth is recorded and then sent here to be assigned a point value based on the absolute moral worth of that action. For example, a couple in Osaka, Japan, just decided to have a destination wedding: negative 1,200 points... Oh, and it’s a destination theme wedding: negative 4,300... The theme’s Lord of the Rings—they’re basically doomed.”

Now, of course, I love any show that uses moral philosophy as a premise for satire, but I am struck by the pervasiveness of this assumption, even among Christians: that basically we’re the ones who determine our salvation. Life is simply a calculus of good and bad, and if you want to go to heaven, if you even believe there is a heaven, you have to be a good person. You have to believe the right things, pray hard enough, give enough money, be nice.

Today, in our Confirmation sermon series, we ask, “Who is your Savior?” And this is one popular answer: you are. Even folks who don’t believe in heaven still seem to believe in some form of salvation by self. Whether it’s the newest diet or technology or accumulation of wealth, it’s on you to make your life better.

That’s a lot of pressure. No wonder anxiety and depression rates are rising; we’re all trying to carry the world on our shoulders. Maybe nowhere is that pressure felt more than among our children—a pressure to be good at school and sports and the arts, to wear the right name brands and be skinny, to fit in and *also* be unique, to choose a career and your life future, and oh yeah, try to survive rocketing rates of addiction and violence and divisiveness and climate change.

I imagine that’s how the woman in our story felt. Pressure. Her people, the Samaritans, and Jesus’ people, the Judeans, were each convinced that they had the right path to salvation. Either God’s holy mountain was in Jerusalem or it was in Samaria, on one of the highest peaks in what is now the Palestinian West Bank, Mount Gerizim. And unless you prayed and sacrificed and worshiped in the right place, you couldn’t be saved.

Then along comes a man who says none of that matters. All that will pass away. He speaks of a gift, a “gift of God,” and he calls it “living water.” He says that if you depend on yourself, you will always end up thirsty again, “but those who drink of the water that I will give them,” he says, “will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

The story ends with the Samaritans proclaiming Jesus “Savior of the world.” And here’s what makes Jesus so different. He says we’re not saved by a tally of what we do or believe. We’re not saved by the temple we worship in, or the people we associate with, or how smart or beautiful or good we are. We’re saved by a gift, a grace. Because we couldn’t do it ourselves.

That’s the twist in the show “The Good Place.” It turns out that modern life has become so complicated that it’s impossible to earn enough points to get into the good place. Every single person is going to the bad place. Over the course of the next several seasons, the main characters try to reform the system to make it better. But Jesus doesn’t want to reform the system. He wants to break it. It’s not about correcting the calculation. It’s about loving you enough to give it to you anyway.

Ephesians 2:8: “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Romans 9:16: “So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.” Or, as Jesus says in John 15:16, “You did not choose me but I chose you.” If God is Love, as 1 John states, then God sees us, judges us, not through the lens of our successes and failures, but through the lens of God’s own divine love.

We are saved by grace through Jesus Christ.

But in truth, the question isn’t just “Who is our Savior?” It’s also “How is he our Savior?” What does Jesus save us from?

Throughout Christian history, there have been many theories of salvation, one of the most popular being substitutionary atonement, in which Jesus dies to satisfy God’s wrath against human sin and is punished in our place. It goes something like this: we’re sinners; God is just; thus, God is obliged to punish us; but innocent Jesus has sacrificed himself by taking our place, thus satisfying God’s need for justice; and if we have faith in this, we can be saved from Hell and go to Heaven, the Good Place.

I’m sure there’s truth to this, but when this becomes our emphasis—being saved from judgment and wrath—I think we miss the mark. What I see in the fourth chapter of John isn’t a concern for wrath and judgment but a concern for pain, thirst, loneliness, and separation—a concern for healing and love.

I see a woman who is alone, separated from her community, coming to draw water from a well at the hottest time of the day. There’s no one else there. No one to help. No one to care. Maybe she’s divorced or widowed, meaning she has no one to lean on and may be ostracized and shamed by her community. Or perhaps her five husbands refer to the five nations who conquered and settled Samaria, separating them from their Jewish siblings. There is a gulf of mistrust and

hostility between her and Jesus, as she asks how it is that a Jewish man would ask her, a woman of Samaria, for a drink—she who is supposed to be unclean, unwanted, bad and unsaved.

But Jesus just keeps talking about that water. The kind of water that life—I mean, real living—isn't possible without. The kind of water when you drink it, you're never thirsty again. The kind of water that gushes up inside of you, springing hope. The kind of water that, when you drink it, you know you're somebody because you're loved and protected by the only Body that matters.

And oh, she wants this water.

To this woman, for the first time in the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks the divine name, the name uttered to Moses in Egypt, the great I AM.

And when she hears this name, she drops her jar and leaves it behind, and with it, all the shame, invisibility, and rejection that made it so heavy. She leaves that water jar and runs back to the city, where she tells her people to come and see the Messiah.

She rejoins her community, and for two days, Jewish and Samaritan disciples eat, worship, learn, and work together in peace.

I think we get it wrong if we think that this salvation from Jesus is all about justice and whether we go to heaven or hell. When Jesus looked at that Samaritan woman, he didn't see a condemned person; he saw a hurting person. We are meant to be like this (hands clasped together) with God, with each other, with ourselves, and instead we're like this (hands apart).

There's a gap—between who I am and who I want to be, between you and me and this whole world, between God and me, between the way the world is supposed to be and the way it is. This gap hurts. And in steps Jesus. He steps into the gap, straddling both sides, the human and the divine, the hurting and the dreaming. He meets the Samaritan woman there. He meets us there. He becomes the bridge to reunite us. Jesus saves us from an alienated life, a purposeless, lonely, thirsty, broken life, with death being the ultimate separation. And he saves us, not just later, but right now, so that the good place—the place where you can fly and dance and be truly yourself with God and everyone else—that good place isn't just waiting for you in the future; it's right now. It's inside you, and in every connection, and every worship, and every breath of love that reaches into your body and spirit every moment of every day. It's "living water" being poured into you, so that you are part of the story again, you are part of all this—all God—again. **Amen.**