

Saints, Not Saviors

Fifth Sunday in Lent, 17 March 2024

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

When I was growing up, my dad saw to it that Sunday mornings were different in our house. Sunday mornings my dad would rise before the sun to practice his sermon and commit it to memory. Sunday mornings were also the time my dad would blare Christian music at top volume seemingly without a care for anyone who might be sleeping.

One of the songs he would blast was a song written from Psalm 51, which we just prayed together and then sung together. *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.* I don't think I've heard this song since my childhood, but I remembered every word. The Sunday morning difference has forever emblazoned the words and tune in my mind, in my heart.

Today is the Fifth Sunday in Lent, and on this Sunday we invite God to make us a new creation. Psalm 51 outlines what it might mean to be created new, and it's a matter of a new heart, a new spirit, and a new kind of friendship with God. I'd like for us to understand today's invitation to become a new creation as an invitation to become saints, not saviors, and we'll try to understand this through a newness of heart and spirit. But first, I'd like to say what I mean about becoming saints, not saviors.

Last week, our Artist in Residence Martha Iler installed a new piece and invited us to see the tension of our lives through the lens of our finances. In so doing, Martha helped us see one way in which we are tempted to save our lives by building wealth. Today Jesus teaches his disciples, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn 12:25). But how are we to understand such words, especially in the light of Rev. Judy Cox's sermon last week that reminded us that salvation is a present reality. Doesn't the present reality of salvation mean that we can experience God's liberation now? Salvation means healing, Rev. Judy reminded us, and God offers us healing and salvation now, in this life. How are we to understand the tension of the present healing and salvation of the Gospel, while also heeding Jesus's warning that seems to disregard our present life altogether?

Christians have, since the beginning of the church, answered this question in a variety of ways. For some, hating your life has meant punishing your body through fasting, isolation, and self-flagellation. For others, hating your life has meant taking a vow of poverty, denouncing sexual intimacy, and submitting your life to a religious community. For others, hating your life has meant openness to Holy Spirit-disruptions that compel you to faithful action in any number of directions. Jesus's puzzling statement has invited a range of responses, and today I would like to suggest that it is an invitation to become saints, not saviors. Saints see that the story is about God, and not about them.

In his book *Improvisation*, Sam Wells introduces his readers to the Five-Act play, which helps clarify for us the distinction between saints and saviors as we chart a course for new creation.

You might remember that the five-act play is a story all about God. In Act 1 God creates the world because there is so much love in the Trinity that it overflowed in abundance into creation. Act 2 is when God promises covenant relationship with Israel in the ways described by the prophet Jeremiah in today's reading. It's a love story, with Israel being the bride of God, who held Israel by the hand and rescued her from Egypt. Act 2 is a love story of how Israel fell in and out of faithfulness with God to the point that God decided to enter into the drama in the flesh in Jesus. That's Act 3. Act 3 is the center of the story. Act 3 is when all the important things happen in the whole five-act play, because Act 3 is when God in Christ saved the world. Notice the past tense here. God has already saved the world, and God did this through Jesus. In Christ, God has conquered sin, death, and the devil.

Act 5 is the end of the story, and despite Kirk Cameron's wildest dreams, it's not the most important part of the story, nor is it the most interesting part. Act 5 is when God will make all things right. Act 4 is the time in the middle, it's the time of the church, and it's our time. Act 4 is not a particularly significant time because there's nothing we can do to unsave the world or bring it to completion. Act 4 rather, is the time of the church to live into the new creation Christ makes possible. In Act 4 we celebrate Jesus and how God made possible for us a new way of living and loving such that we don't have to fight for our lives but rather receive our lives as all gift. God made possible new creation.

Act 4 is the time for us to improvise, as Wells puts it, and in our improvisation we get some things right and some wrong, but we always have God who invites us to confess our wrongs and give God glory for the times we get it right. Saints point to God. And when we get it right and give God the credit, we become the saints God made us to be; people made holy through our friendship with God who is holy and loved us first.

The Five Act play helps us see that we live in a time to become saints, not saviors. That job was already completed by Jesus and so we can thank God and celebrate the ways in which God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. In Act 4, our job is to follow Jesus, not save others. We can hope that our faithful discipleship will bring others to embrace God's saving action in their lives, but that's all we can do: point people to Jesus who saved them.

Martha's art and Jesus's words invite us into the tension of becoming saints, a new creation, rather than saviors. What would it look like to point to Jesus with our finances? What would it look like to point to Jesus, not only with our lips, but in our lives, as we pray each week together? How might we become saints with new hearts and new spirits? Our readings this morning suggest that our being made new involves confession, compassion, and covenant.

Psalm 51 is a prayer of confession. As one of the penitential psalms, this Psalm teaches us to confess to God and seek God's mercy. The idea here is that no sin is too large for God to save us from, and so we ask for God's mercy, cleansing, and healing. In his advice for praying Psalm 51, the Egyptian saint Athanasius says this, "You sinned and feeling guilty, you repent and ask to be shown mercy. You have words of confession and conversion in Psalm 51." *You have words for confession and conversion in Psalm 51.* By confessing our sin we open ourselves to conversion as God creates in us new hearts and spirits. What makes Christians different is not that we don't sin, but rather that we know what to do when we sin: we confess. Through our confession, we receive a new heart and spirit as God saves and heals us, making us into saints. Again, it's not that we don't sin, it's that we confess, and receive God's salvation. Confession keeps us from the delusion that we are saviors. We become a community of saints each Sunday when we gather on our knees and confess together.

In addition to our confession, becoming saints involves compassion. Here the author of Hebrews points us to Jesus, our high priest appointed by God. The author states that Jesus offers “eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb 5:9). What might it look like for our suffering to be a vehicle through which God saves us?

Compassion literally means “suffering with.” By suffering with others, we follow Jesus our priest who, the author of Hebrews tells us, “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears” (Heb 5:7). By suffering with others, we become a new creation. Our reading today from Hebrews underlines how Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:5-10). We become a new creation by receiving the gift of compassion, by receiving the invitation to suffer with others. By praying for each other, whether in the prayers of the people, at lunch, during a ball game, or on a nature walk, we open ourselves to the gift of compassion as we suffer with others and receive God’s salvation. Through the gift of compassion we remember that by suffering with others, we also need God’s saving action. Compassion reminds us that we all need a Savior. By suffering with others, we are saved from the delusion that we suffer on behalf of others as Jesus did.

Third, God offers us the gift of covenant for becoming a new creation with new hearts and spirits. Our reading today from Jeremiah is all about God offering Israel a new covenant after Israel’s faithlessness. Despite our wayward hearts, God makes a new way through a new covenant that enables our transformation inside and out. Through God’s new covenant, which Christians call Jesus, God’s law and love is written on our hearts as we embrace our most fundamental identity as God’s beloved friends. God saves us by befriending us. Covenant names God’s friendship with us, in spite of our infidelities and failures. Any time we are tempted to step into the place of being someone’s savior, covenant reminds us that only God is unfailing in faithfulness. Jesus is God’s covenant with us, fulfilling a faithfulness that Israel and we never could. Each week we gather to celebrate God’s faithfulness to Israel and us, in spite of our infidelity and failings. Covenant names how God is faithful in saving us, without fail.

Through confession, compassion, and covenant, we embrace practices and receive gifts that draw us nearer to God and remind us that Jesus is our savior, not us. By drawing nearer to God, we

become a new people, a community of saints who point to Jesus who saved us and keeps saving each day. All these practices are practices of Connection, which draw us nearer to God and one another. Our Gospel lesson shows us how following Jesus draws us closer to each other as we become saints, a community of holy people who point to Jesus.

The author of John's Gospel shows us today that by following Jesus the Greeks drew closer to the disciples and the disciples to them. By following Jesus, the disciples learned the abundance of the resurrection that comes only through death. And by following Jesus, we become servants of one another. Through connection Jesus draws us to himself and one another as we become saints who enjoy life with the Savior.

We need friends to follow Jesus and we need friends to remind us that we are called to be saints, not saviors. Our connection with one another helps us become people for whom confessing, compassion, and covenant become deep joys because our desires have been reshaped by our friendship with God. Confession is not a burden, it's a gift. Through confession, God frees us from the burden of guilt and shame and frees us for lives of discipleship. Through compassion, God frees us from selfishness and frees us for friendship with others. Through covenant, God frees us from our mistakes and frees us for life with God who makes all things new. These practices of connection are gifts that enable us to receive with joy the gift of sainthood as we celebrate our Savior how makes us a new creation.

The invitation for us all on this Fifth Sunday of Lent is to learn to receive and enjoy God's strange gifts; gifts like confession, compassion, and covenant, that are all about making us saints. Because we have a Savior, we get to be saints. Saints have learned that our lives were never our own to begin with. Our life was always only a gift. Saints are those who love the life God graciously gives and hate all prospects of life in defiance of God. Thanks be to God for saving us from ourselves and giving us lives more beautiful life than we could have imagined.