

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**  
**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**  
**Church Year C**  
**Date: 6/12/16**  
**Season: The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Luke 7:36-50, Galations 2:15-21**

“Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

A strange ending to a story about forgiveness. What do faith and forgiveness have to do with each other, you may be asking yourself? After all, isn't faith about what we believe or don't believe and forgiveness about what we have done or failed to do? What does one have to do with the other? That's a pretty good question and one, I think, that invites us to reflect on the nature of faith and maybe even to reframe our understanding of faith. Is faith a matter of checking off boxes on a set of beliefs, a set of doctrines or dogmas or first principles? Now, don't get me wrong. I think doctrines and dogmas and first principles are important. They form the firm ground on which we can make a stand. We need them. But let me suggest that if we stop there, if we don't move beyond our first principles, we will miss the heart of the gospel. In fact we will miss salvation.

Whoa, you say. Miss salvation? That's a train I sure don't want to miss. Neither did the Apostle Paul. Which is what we hear him saying to the Church in Galatia this morning. Paul is speaking to a church in conflict. The Galatians are enmeshed in a conflict that raged throughout the first and second generations of the church. Is adherence to the Law of Moses sufficient for salvation? That is to say, is following the law, following first principles, all that is necessary to have a full and complete relationship with the Living God? No, says Paul, and he holds himself up as an example. Recall, that before his conversion, he was Saul, the Jewish persecutor of the new Christian sect. He was zealous for the Law. But his conversion experience, his experience of being in relationship with the Living Christ, a relationship which brought with it the forgiveness of his terrible murderous behavior towards Christians, showed him that just following the law was not enough. “No one will be justified – set right – simply by following the works of the law.” Just standing on first principles won't get you there. “I have died to the law so I might live for God,” says Paul. And now here Paul reveals the depth of his truly mystical experience and mystical relationship to Christ.

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.”

Here's where salvation lies. The old self, Saul, the zealous rule-follower and persecutor, the one who in his arrogance was so sure he was right and his enemies were wrong, the one who arrogantly assumed that he knew the will of God and was God's

avenger, that old self has died. And a new self, Paul, the forgiven servant, has been born. The one who says that I now live by **faith** in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

So faith, it seems, has everything to do with forgiveness, with recognizing our faults and flaws, the things we've done we wish we hadn't and the things we haven't done that we wish we had. Faith transcends the Law. Our first principles are just a starting point – the place from which we can recognize whether our behavior is life-affirming or life-denying. And it's then in Faith that we turn to Christ and offer up, in humility and vulnerability and, yes, in courage, our heartfelt need for forgiveness.

That's what we hear Jesus say to the woman who shows up uninvited to the dinner party being thrown by Simon the Pharisee. The righteous, rule-following Simon is of course appalled that a notoriously sinful woman – gasp, a “woman of the city” – should have the temerity to come to his home. And then – throw herself at the feet of his guest with this public display of affection and gratitude – well it was just too much for this self-righteous religious official. How could his guest, who some people were even calling a prophet, have anything to do with this notorious woman? And then, Jesus, seeming to read his mind, told him a story. Consider two debtors. One owes a huge sum. The other a lesser sum. The creditor forgives both debts. Which debtor is the more grateful? Why, the one whose debt was the greatest, says Simon. “Exactly,” says Jesus. And then drives the point home. “This woman, who you criticize and belittle, has offered her whole self to me in love and gratitude. What have you offered? Not much.”

Jesus then makes explicit the connection between forgiveness and love. “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven. She has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little.” In other words, if you don't have the humility, the vulnerability, the courage to admit what you've done and failed to do, you won't have received forgiveness for which to be grateful. And won't have love to offer.

Faith, real faith, always leads us off the high diving board into the deep end of the pool. We often live with the illusion that it's easier to go through life guarding our secrets, withholding ourselves, pretending the darkness that lives inside every person doesn't live in us.

But faith knows another way. Faith knows the way of humility, of vulnerability, of courage. In stepping off that high dive towards the deep of the pool, faith trusts that, while we will get wet, we won't drown, and we'll emerge out of the deep water refreshed and renewed. Healed, even.

You see, I think this is another one of the healing stories in Luke's gospel. The healing stories aren't only about lepers and blind men and dead sons and grieving

mothers. The healing stories are also about healing shame. Healing exclusion. Healing psychic and spiritual pain so deep it keeps us from real and true and lasting and loving relationships. Faith that invites us to reveal the things we think are the worst part of ourselves, to shine a little sunlight on them, to allow Christ to carry them for us, that kind of faith makes room for healing.

And the same is true for shame that may not even be the result of what we've done or failed to do. Culturally imposed shame. Like the brave young Stanford student who was so brutally raped. In her vulnerability and courage, she has spoken out so powerfully and forcefully and eloquently, refusing to play the culturally assigned role of sex object. I have no idea whether or not she is a person of any professed religious faith. But it occurs to me that in confronting her rapist so bravely she is making space for God's healing grace whether or not she would use that language.

So faith, I think, is not at all the same as belief in systems or first principles. As Paul and Jesus teach us, faith is about the courage to stand on first principles and then courageously step off that tall diving tower, in all vulnerability and humility. To confront our shame. To seek forgiveness. And that's the way to salvation. You know the root word for salvation is "salvus" which means "healing," "health," "wholeness."

So, salvation is for now. Right now. It does take faith. The faith to seek forgiveness and the faith to offer forgiveness. And faith takes courage, and humility, and vulnerability. So now is the time, this is the moment. Are you ready to hear the Lord Jesus say to you, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." Amen.