

GOD IS GOOD BECAUSE GOD IS LOVE

Matthew 19:16-26

Amos 5:6-7; 10-15

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What does it take to be saved or putting it another way what does it take to get right with God so you can be standing with the sheep and not with the goats on Judgment Day?

I hope you don't answer, "being a good person" because the scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, make it plain that no one is good enough, we all fall short of God's glory. Even good people, even the best of them are still sinners having broken relationships with God and their neighbors. Hence the disciples question, "Then who can be saved?"

Jesus' answer points to what is one of the foundational teachings of the biblical faith: it's impossible for you and me to save ourselves. All our good deeds and acts of kindness, put together, aren't enough to bridge the gap between God and us. But there's good news. What's impossible for us is possible with God. We're saved not because God ignores our sin but only because God confronts our sin, head on, through the crucifixion. Only the sacrificial act of one who never knew sin could ever make salvation possible for the world.

Still, God demands we live a certain way, not to earn our salvation, but simply because it's the right thing to do. God's universe isn't guided by the law of the jungle but the Golden Rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." When this law is kept all is well, but when it's broken we're knocked off kilter.

How we ended up broken and lost is wonderfully explained in the story of Adam and Eve. Even though they lived in perfect harmony with nature, God and each other their hubris drove them to reject God's authority and become their own gods. This story of their rebellion explains why we too are broken and lost and need fixing far better than any complicated philosophical theories ever concocted by man. Simply put, we are the way we are because we give ourselves self-inflicted wounds. Adam and Eve is you and me and everyone else who ever lived, except Jesus.

Unfortunately we'd rather not dwell too long on their disobedience because then we'd then have to take responsibility for our own. Like them, we'd rather be our own god, even if it means denying ourselves access to the governing power of the universe that empowers us to love and be loved.

In the first letter of John we read, "God is love and those who live in love live in union with God and God lives in union with them." (1 John 4:16)

John reveals this awesome truth: God isn't only the source of love, he's the personification of love. We may defy God's will, but his love can't be conquered. Instead God's love conquers us, even when we're at our worst, if we let him.

"If we let him." Isn't that the problem? Instead of being conquered by Love, we'd resist, but wanting to give us a second chance God sends us truth tellers (or prophets) not only to confront and convict us but to love and redeem us.

There was no need to send any prophets to Israel when the people were being good but when they were breaking faith they were still called back to renew their relationship with the One who loved them so they'd become not just a good people but a redeemed people, saved by a power greater than themselves. But because we have free will, and can make our own choices, God could only do so much. It was up to the people to listen and repent.

Unfortunately for them, the rich and powerful in Israel didn't want to listen. Being cruel and greedy they exploited the poor and turned them into slaves when they couldn't pay their debts. Systematically dishonest, they cheated each other in the market place. What's more, to rationalize their wicked ways they turned to the available free wheeling pagan religions that always gave a pass on any ethical standards making them accountable for their actions.

Amos warned them they were living in a fantasy world whose days were numbered. The wealth they confiscated from each other wasn't sustainable, guaranteeing the boom times would end in economic depression. Bleeding their economy dry to sustain their affluent life styles they only made themselves weak and vulnerable.

Dropping any pretense of being a covenant community guided by standards of love and justice for all, Amos could only speak the truth in love but also anger and despair as he watched the people squander their legacy as the Chosen Ones. Even so, his warnings fell on deaf ears, especially since the people were convinced their high living was proof of God's favor. Can you hear them dismissing Amos? "Get out of here you crazy old coot and take your gloom and doom with you!"

You may be wondering why God wasted his time reaching out to these stiff-necked people, knowing beforehand he'd be turned down flat. The only answer can be, God is Love. God can't help himself, he can only keep on loving us, giving us every chance to listen and repent.

The rich and powerful of Israel couldn't or wouldn't help themselves, but is it also true for us? Know this: Amos still speaks to our generation giving us the same message and choice. Will we listen and be a light to all the nations of the earth, beginning here in Baltimore, or will we repeat the refrain whenever a truth teller's in ear shot, "Get out of here you old coot and take your doom and gloom with you?"

How we answer that question depends on how seriously we take the message "God is love and those who live in love live in union with God and God lives in union with them." (John 4:16)

When you get down to it, our everyday behavior is ultimately determined by the quality of our relationship with God. And since God is the personification of love, doesn't it follow that if you live in union with God, if you nurture and keep your relationship with God, your life will be empowered, guided and sealed by God's love?

Apparently the rich young ruler in today's Gospel reading didn't quite understand that. Unlike the rich and powerful Amos preached to, this young man was obviously serious about keeping the commandments, but like them, he wanted his wealth more than God's love. There's no indication he became wealthy by exploiting the poor, more likely he inherited it. Even so, you get the sense if he were living today he'd be like any other young Christian man or woman who grew up in the church, active in Sunday School, a member of the choir and possibly a leader in the youth group and held in high regard by one and all. But still, according to Jesus, he lacked one thing, he couldn't or wouldn't deny himself that one thing that kept him from experiencing God's love. Yes he was a good person and Jesus saw the good in him, but being good wasn't good enough.

When the young man went away sad and disturbed Jesus then famously said it was harder for a rich man to enter God's kingdom than it was for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, leaving the disciples anxious and confused. "Who then can be saved?"

That's when Jesus quickly answered "What's impossible for man is possible for God."

Jesus himself was often identified as being a prophet, and for good reason. Like Amos and the other prophets of old, Jesus spoke truth to power; he called God's people to repent literally do a 180, turn away from the law of the jungle and be embraced by the Golden Rule. He spoke against hypocrisy and greed and advocated for tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners. He acted like a prophet whenever he chose God's law over man's traditions by healing on the Sabbath. He warned against laying up treasures on earth instead of laying up treasures in heaven. He spoke against a gutless religion that was style over substance. Jesus was a prophet.

But Jesus was much more than that, also acting like a high priest, but a high priest who sacrificed himself for the sins of the world. Jesus accomplished at his crucifixion what no one else could ever do, he made salvation possible. Why did he put himself through that awful suffering no one else could ever endure, even though he didn't have to? One answer: God is love. God loves us, not because we're good, but because he's good. God saves us, not because we're good, but because he's good.

Jesus asked the Church to remember him through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Here we are both invited and encouraged to reenact his last supper with his closest friends in the Upper Room, by communing with him today so he can be one with us and we with him. We are asked to remember Jesus who breaks through our sins and sorrows to bring the impossible: abundant life and eternal joy.

Here's the Good News, Jesus wants to live in you so he can live through you, healing the sick, befriending the friendless, speaking the truth in love when necessary and

loving God and your neighbor as yourself always. Question: How can you and I get ourselves turned around, learn the secret of living the full abundant life, and then have the motivation to put it into practice and move slowly but surely to becoming more Christ-like in our attitudes and behaviors? How can any of this be possible? Only because God is good and God is love.

Let God love you. Ask God to help you fall in love with Jesus and then you'll know how it's possible to be saved.