

SLD03.26.06 4th Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 3:14-21
Jill Oglesby Evans

Extravagant Salvation

I feel a little nervous, like I'm about to do something dangerous. Like I'm fixin' to cross some line of doctrinal rectitude, or theological rigor, or responsible scholarship, or generally accepted principles of Presbyterian preaching. Or, more to the point, that I'm about to make somebody, maybe somebody here today, angry at me because they don't agree.

But let me remind you that people of good faith can disagree, indeed, *do* disagree, all the time, about differing interpretations of scripture. And further, that the faith and practice of our denomination make ample room for such disagreement. In fact, Numero Uno of the Historic Principles of Church Order outlined in our Book of Order is that, and I quote, "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship." (G-1.0301 (1)(a))

So while we Presbyterians expect of ourselves to approach scripture with humility and intelligence and faith in the heart-opening work of the Holy Spirit, we certainly *don't* expect always to agree on its interpretation, or ultimate meaning, or revelation about the nature of God. In our tradition, thankfully, there are no popes, or popettes, to decree a single orthodox meaning for scripture. For us, scripture is alive, alive with the Holy Spirit, and we are constantly working out individually and in community, the living meaning of God's Word for today.

There are limits, to be sure, to how far afield one's faith understandings can wander and still remain within the rubric of our reformed tradition. Indeed - ask any seminary student - our denomination goes to great lengths to confirm that those of us admitted as teachers and ministers are sound in the faith. Still, it is also stated in our Book of Order that "we believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men and women of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these," write the founders of our denomination, "we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other." (G-1.0305) (5)

So with that confession of potential apostasy and personal plea for your forbearance, just what *is* the controversy I intend to set before us this fourth Sunday of Lent? Nothing less, I'm afraid, than the question of the Sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

But is there a question about that? you might ask. Is anyone here going to disagree doctrinally, at least out loud, with the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Well, maybe nobody here would. But what if I take it too far? What if I press the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ beyond us here? ? What if I push God's sovereignty and the Lordship of Jesus Christ past our own faith and our belief system to all the earth, to all the universe, to all creation? What if I push it past everything we know or understand or imagine about God?

That could be a problem. I mean, how sovereign are we really prepared for God to be?

The conception of God's sovereignty and Jesus' Lordship that reverberates in my bones way down deeper than doctrines and creeds and conventional belief systems, is very, very big. And very, very powerful. And very, very loving. But that can get dangerous. Because the understanding of God, and specifically of God's revelation through Christ Jesus, that resonates in the core of my being, that motivates me one minute and convicts me the next, that understanding of the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ is so big and so powerful and so loving that when I hear a passage like today's text from the Gospel of John, a passage so central to what we believe as Christians...well...maybe I hear it a little differently than some Christians. Maybe a little differently than some of you. And what I want to say, and what I want you to say, is that that's okay. Because maybe I'm right, or maybe you're right, or maybe 'right' falls somewhere in between us – but our reformed faith tradition makes room for different understandings of scripture, all in the same family.

Okay, so most of us who hear the beautiful and familiar words of today's text from John recognize in it the basic creed of our faith: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

And that pretty well sums it up, doesn't it? In fact, this text of John's so effectively captures the core of our faith that it finds itself the most bannered and billboarded quote in American Christianity. And I figure we all agree that, patriarchal language notwithstanding, chapter 3, verse 16 of John pretty well

says it all for us Christians – that God so loved the world that God sent Jesus Christ to save it.

It just may be that I hear a louder emphasis than some on God loving and saving the *whole* world.

And sure enough, in the next verse, John goes on to say that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. And likewise, later in John’s gospel, Jesus says “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw *all people* to myself.” (12:32)

But in *today’s* text John goes on to say that saving all people is maybe *not* what God had in mind. For “those who believe in Jesus are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” And this is where some good and faithful Christians say “Whew! Sure glad I’m a believer and am not condemned,” followed by, “too bad about all those other people who don’t believe in Jesus, ‘cause they’re condemned already. I’ll pray for them.”

So which is correct? And who is to say? Does God intend salvation for all people or just the select few who have had the good fortune to be exposed to Christianity and the good sense to embrace it? When Jesus says he’ll draw *all people* to himself, does he mean *all people* or just all Christians? Just how selective is God’s intention for redemption? What are its conditions? What are its terms? Just how *does* one measure up?

For many believers it’s pretty tempting to go sheep and goats route. You know, to sign up for the wheat and tares taxonomy that makes God and Jesus

and the good guys and the bad guys so pleasingly clear to those of us who are trying to sort through what to believe and how to live faithfully. But the problem with that approach is...you and I might not end up in the group we intend.

I mean, I certainly want to sign *my* name on the sheep/wheat/good guy side of the page, but if there's anything that this durn season of Lent is good for, it's driving home the truth that before God, you or I, regardless of our profession of faith, pretty much fall under the goat/tare/bad guy heading. Hate that. But I also get that maybe we ought not to press that selective salvation idea too very far...there's just something about this reflective season that magnifies our own durn depravity....

So if our profession of faith doesn't keep us safe and saved, of what is our salvation, our redemption, our peace, our hope in eternal life, a function? Certainly not of anything that you or I profess or believe or feel in any given moment, but rather of the grace of God. It's not our profession of faith or even our capacity to live into it that keeps you and me safe and saved; it's *God's* initiative through Christ Jesus in redeeming the whole world, which, incidentally, happens to include us.

But if our profession of faith doesn't keep us Christians safe and saved, do others' professions of faith, or lack thereof, not keep them unsafe and unsaved? After all, John says that 'those who believe in Jesus are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already.' How do we reconcile this with John's proclamation that God so loved the *world* that God intends the redemption of it, of *all* of it, through Christ Jesus? Well, I can't say for sure. But

don't you think that if the God who sent Jesus Christ to redeem the world is gracious enough to redeem those of us who know Jesus as Lord but still do such a crummy job of living out our belief, that same very, very big, very, very powerful and very, very loving God will figure out a way to redeem the rest of creation as well? If it really *is* God's intention not to condemn the world, but to save the world through Jesus Christ, don't you reckon God'll figure out a way to do just that?

Perhaps God has more ways of reaching creation than we've yet imagined. Perhaps there are more manifestations of Christ Jesus than we understand. Or maybe when Jesus "was put to death in the flesh and made alive in the spirit and goes to make a proclamation to the spirits in prison," the way I Peter talks about (3:18b), maybe that's when Jesus appears to non-believers in some *irresistible* fashion.... I mean, maybe God's got all kinds of tricks up the divine sleeve for reaching the souls of believers and non-believers alike. I like to think that standing before the throne of God on the Day of the Last Judgment, the faithful and the pagan and the lukewarm of every tradition look at each other in total surprise and delight and exclaim, 'Well, for heaven's sake! Who could have guessed?!'

I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong. It's all speculation, isn't it? All I know is that when I hear the grand and all-encompassing and all welcoming and all redeeming description of Jesus Christ written by the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Colossians, I'm pretty sure God's got everything under control. Paul writes, (Jesus Christ) "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all

creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, *and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.*” (Col. 1:15-20)

Now some people call Peter’s angle on God ‘universalism.’ Me, I just call it God’s extravagant salvation, intended by our very, very big, and very, very powerful, and very, very loving God for all God’s beloved creation. But you know, I could be wrong. How’s about you and I just agree to meet up later at the foot of the throne of God to see it all gets worked out.

To the glory of God. Amen.