

April 27, 2008

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### **The Gift of New Life: Redemption**

#### Acts 9

Redemption is a word that we may be able to define, but it is a reality we have difficulty living. The redemptive work of Jesus Christ brings deliverance from guilt and the power of sin. Hebrews 9:12 states: "he (Christ) entered once for all into the Holy Place...with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption." This passage speaks to the act of atonement in the crucifixion and the redemption of all as God's accomplishment; as God's saving will. We have been delivered from turning from God. Certainly the temptation is ever present and we turn from God on a regular basis, but the door to God's grace is always open. God welcomes us back to God. God lavishes love upon us and that love is unconditional. What was broken in the relationship between humanity and God in the Garden of Eden is once and for all, restored. We, not just the followers of Christ, but we, all of creation are redeemed. It is a reality that is here and now and not yet fully realized. It is mystery and it is confounding to those who desperately need the realities of our lives to be concrete and sequential. When it comes to the acts of God, the vast majority of God's ways are mystery to us.

Paul is an enemy of the followers of Jesus Christ. Fifteen to twenty years after the death of Jesus, Paul is sanctioned by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem to hunt down and arrest any and all who practice their faith in the tradition of Jesus. The image offered by Paul himself in Acts 22 is of an arrogant, self-righteous, brutal man. He goes out of the city of Jerusalem, bearing a letter from the high priests and demands that Jewish leaders in the outlying communities give to Paul the names of those following the teachings of Jesus. Paul confronts them, binds them and delivers them to be imprisoned in Jerusalem. He considered the followers of Jesus as traitors to the Jewish faith tradition and he dedicated his life to weeding them out.

It is of this one, this wretched, brutal soul that we hear in Acts 9. (Read Acts 9:1-16)

This horrible, vicious man is the very one whom Jesus chooses to bring his name to the Gentiles! Paul, who was responsible for the death of countless followers of Jesus, is the one who is selected to take the church to the Gentiles. That is redemption!

And Paul is not alone. Peter who denied Jesus three times on the night that Jesus was arrested, Peter who walked away from the Jesus to whom he had sworn his allegiance, it is this Peter upon which Jesus builds the church. That is redemption!

The redemption offered in the crucifixion and the resurrection applies to every aspect that binds us, to every act that would take us away from the grace of God. We are released to live in the glory of God's grace. If we turn from that grace and seek forgiveness, we are forgiven. We will not be left to drown in our mistakes and self-centeredness. As we turn back to the Divine and open our hearts and our lives to the love that God extends to us, we are restored; we are redeemed.

According to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, Christ has not died in vain; Christ has redeemed the very souls of his people. We are pardoned, forgiven, and restored to live our lives as God's people. What is offered is an entire change of heart as well as life.

*The Mission* is a movie set in 18<sup>th</sup> century South America. It is in part about a slave trader played by Robert DeNiro. DeNiro's character has focused his life on violence as a slave trader, capturing and selling Indians from above the Iguazu Falls on the border between Brazil and Argentina. To make matters even worse, if that is possible, in a fit of anger he also murders his brother. Completely convinced of his own degradation, he comes to the conclusion that he is completely irredeemable. A Catholic priest befriends him and offers him a way out. He ties an enormous bundle of heavy metal objects for him to drag up the side of these magnificent, but treacherous falls. He drags this bundle upward. Step by step, he slips and slides in the mud of the rain forest and climbs up the dangerous sides of the falls. It is painful to watch. Up and up he climbs for days until he is finally at the top of the falls. He is traveling with priests and the Indians are happy to see the priests, but then are concerned when they see the slave trader. He is crawling by the time he gets to the top of the falls. He is covered with mud, completely exhausted, near death and one of the Indians takes a knife and holds it to his neck. Yet, instead of cutting his throat, the Indian cuts the heavy rope from the heavy burden he has been carrying. Not only does the Indian cut the rope, he pushes the bundle over the ledge into the water. The Indian frees the very man who has terrorized his people. He does not give the slave trader what he deserves; instead he frees him from his agony, his misery, and his pathetic life. The slave trader is already on his knees. He cries, he laughs, he is released, he is pardoned, amazingly and utterly unbelievably he is redeemed and remains with the priests and the Indian people to build a mission.

Getting a glimpse of redemption? God has restored us to God's good graces. Let that sink in. Let that take root. Let that seep into your heart. Surely it brings a smile to your lips. Surely it gives you a sense of euphoria. Surely you want to drop to your knees in gratitude. I know that I do. We are redeemed. Now, let's live like it.

Jesus releases us from the tragic decisions in our lives, Jesus releases us from guilt that we carry within us, Jesus releases us from the baggage that binds us and restores us to new life, transforms us once and for all. That is redemption.

We all carry negative within us. We are surrounded by the negatives of our culture. We live in a land where we are expected to become polarized against another. Be it on an issue of politics or religion or even sports. We have been trained to take a position and fight for that position right to the death. It has more to do with power and control than even our sense of being right. However our desire to be right, even when we are not right, will push us to toward domination and even violence. Redemption keeps the energy, but redirects it toward that which is encouraging, nurturing, and positive. Waste not one more moment on the demeaning of others, but rather live as if you are redeemed and lift up the other, listen to the other, offer compassion toward the other, reconcile with the other. That is redemption.

My friend, Rabbi Jon Adland, recommended a book to me last fall. It has taken me months to actually read it, but once I started it, I could not put it down. The book is by Richard Preston and it is entitled, "The Wild Trees." I learned far more about trees than I ever expected. The story is of a group of college students, who are studying the trees. What I could not imagine was the description about their climbing up into the trees and sleeping in hammocks which were tied between branches three hundred feet in the air. Near the end of the book aloft in a tree named Zeus that may have been alive back when the worship of Zeus was strong in the cities of Hellas, two climbers begin to talk. This is a part of their exchange.

"I'm afraid that our work trying to understand the redwood forest might just turn out to be documenting something magnificent before it winks out. This forest gives us a glimpse of what the world was like a very long time ago, before humans came into existence. We are in one of the last great rain forests remaining in the temperate zone. Maybe these trees can teach us something about ourselves. We're little snapshots in time, we'll soon be gone. This grove has burned in huge fires during the past millennia. Redwoods don't die if they burn. A redwood can be burned to a blackened spar, and afterwards it goes, 'Whoah,' and just grows back. Look at Kronos. It's been hammered. It's dying. And it's more beautiful than ever. These trees can teach us how we can live. We can be hammered and burned, and we can come back and be more beautiful as we grow." p. 278, *The Wild Trees*

If you live in this world, you are bound to be hammered and burned. There is rarely a life that goes unscathed. Sometimes the pain comes from our own choices. Sometimes it comes from choices made by others. Either way, we get scorched. Redemption rescues us from making destructive choices over and over again. Allowing God's love to flow through us and over us and into us restores that which is broken and that which binds us and that which diminishes the holy within us. This gift is God's and it is given not only to us as humans but to us as creation.

The lesson of the redwood, is that even when we are wounded and burned, we are blessed and life continues.

Life on the resurrection side of the cross is life redeemed. I love Voltaire's comment. If the world is going to be interested in the Redeemer, if the world is going to embrace the teachings of Christ and the love of God, then the followers of Christ ought to at least act like they know they are redeemed. I would add, not only should we act, but live like a people redeemed.

Our redemption drives us down to our knees with gratitude, tears, and joy, for we are released; we are pardoned. Amazingly, redemption is ours. Imagine what that will look like at Meridian Street when we as individuals and we as the body of Christ begin to truly live as if we are redeemed. We will experience:

Burdens released

Sin forgiven

Broken relationships reconciled

Bigotries bridged

Heartache healed

Fears overcome

Life restored

Hope instilled

Transformation possible

Love lavishly offered and love joyously received

We are redeemed. Let go of the guilt that holds you. Release the negatives of the past and allow God's love to renew you to live this day with joy.

Every one of us has been hammered and burned along the journey, but the way of redemption is to take the forgiveness and blessing that is offered and become even more beautiful as we live and grow!