

He Saved Us!

Titus 3: 1-11

**First Presbyterian Church
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We're studying a letter sent by the apostle Paul to a young leader named Titus. Paul had left Titus on Crete, a Greek island in the Mediterranean Sea. He asked Titus to lead and strengthen the fledging communities of Christians. While it may sound like life on a Mediterranean island would be a cushy assignment, the fact was that the native Cretans were a tough group. They were known for rough lives of fighting and reveling. The gospel of Jesus brought them forgiveness and a new start, but there were a lot of old bad habits to change. Paul wrote to Titus giving him two areas to focus on: 1) their new identity in Christ and 2) their new way of living as those who belonged to Christ. Titus was to help the Cretans see themselves in a new way so that they could live and act in a new way.

Chapter 3 of the letter to Titus reveals a striking difference between pagans and Christians. There is a marked contrast between those who live from Jesus, and those who live only from themselves. Those who are captivated by Christ have a sharp distinction from those who hold to the illusion that they are autonomous. Paul never forgot where he came from. He reminds Titus of what life before Christ was like, so that he can be both patient and insistent with the church of Crete:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

That's a description of a person wandering in circles who still thinks he's getting somewhere. People pursuing a high life of pleasure but ending up in a low life of debauchery. Have you ever seen pictures of yourself when you've had too much to drink? While the picture is being taken, you're quite sure you look great. Like the king of the world. Like the envy of everyone. When you see the picture later, you realize, "I look like an idiot!" And then you remember some of what came out of your mouth that night and it only gets worse.

Every addiction starts as an expression of defiant freedom. "This pain killer sets me free. I move through the world with a secret. I'm not really here. I have a secret place I go to where I'm free." Too late, we realize that the pills are a cruel

jailer. Or, “I shop because I am free to spend and to acquire. I love the transaction and I love possessing the new goods. It frees me to buy.” But what iron bars of emotional and financial imprisonment have come down when we realize our freedom has become a compulsion we can’t afford.

The line that really chills me in Paul’s description is “passing our days in malice...hated and hating.” Hated and hating. A vicious, self-perpetuating cycle. We spent a dozen years living in the countryside outside of a small town. Mostly, people were wonderful. But we also ran into some that I call “country mean.” They could be willfully ignorant and small minded, and ridiculously vindictive. For some, no bicycle should ever be on a road on which cars travel. That’s why it’s ok to throw a beer can at riders when you roar past in your pick up six inches from their bike. No dog should ever walk across your property unbidden. That’s why it’s ok to put out a drink of antifreeze for the poor beast. Cross me and I’ll get you back, and I never, ever forget.

Those are dramatically nasty examples from people who didn’t care to hide their hatred. But that’s exactly what goes on in every heart that’s trying to get along in the world taking care of itself without God. We have to battle for our right to exist all the time. We are very easily threatened. So we must push out against those who could harm us. Yet it never works. Have you ever noticed how hating others is a magnet for being hated by others? Malice and meanness are boomerangs: they come back on us with constant strife. What’s worse, contempt for other creates paranoia: everyone is out to get me. Everyone scorns me. And then the paranoia actually creates the reality. Once we passed our days in malice and envy, hating others and being hated. As if were stuck perpetually in an eighth grade drama of escalating accusations. Caught like kids in what my daughter calls textastrophes: disasters that come from texts blown out of proportion.

People all around us live disordered lives. Their free pleasures have become slave masters. They live for revenge. They feed on bitterness. They fear. They hate. And outside of Christ, that’s not just a “them,” that’s a “me.” Alone in a harsh, threatening world, my inner life is a jumble of poisonous passions. And that can only create strife in relationships.

Paul reminds Titus, “This is who your people are. They’re just like you and I were without Christ. And even though they know Jesus now, old habits are hard to break. The world is always pulling them back into the pit. They keep going over to pick up dead things to see if there is any life there. Titus, you’ve got to tell them the better story of who they are in Christ.” So once again, Paul brings in the gospel.

Listen for the sharp contrast he makes. Notice how the very words themselves change how we're feeling on the inside. From anxiety and despair to relief and peace. "Once we were foolish, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another." Ugh! "But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our savior appeared, he saved us." Ahhh! Sweet release. Once everything was poison, harsh, and malignant. Then something unexpected appeared. A light shone in the dark. A hand reached to us as we sank in quicksand. The goodness and loving-kindness of God our savior appeared. Love for mankind showed up in a world of haters, and lifted us out of poisonous cesspool. He saved us. He got us out. He brought us home. He set us free.

There is profound depth in how Paul describes the saving we have in Christ Jesus. This is the third time in Titus he uses the word "appeared." It's the same word as "epiphany." We call the 12th day after Christmas *Epiphany* because that's when the wise men arrived to see the baby Jesus. They followed the star, the miraculous light that appeared in the sky. And that led them to the light of the world lying in the arms of Mary. Something even greater than the star appeared in the world that had never happened before. God came to us as the man Jesus. Out of his immeasurable goodness and love for humanity, Jesus came to live a life of love and faithfulness. He came to take away our hearts of stone and give us new hearts open to God and others once again. He accomplished this by taking the sins of the world upon himself on the cross. He accomplished this by defeating death and the devil in his mighty rising from the dead. The gospel is the news about what appeared in the world: the 33 years of the saving, redeeming life of Jesus. The gospel is Jesus Christ. He accomplished our salvation and eternal life.

The redeeming work of Jesus Christ occurred in history. His life among us happened once and for all. But the significance of that life, death and resurrection continue on. What happened in 33 AD still has power for life two thousand years later. For even today, we can get in on the salvation that Jesus won for us. We get joined to him. We get taken up into Christ and all he has accomplished. It changes everything. What happened so long ago has immediate power in our lives right now.

Paul goes on to be sure we understand. When the love of God our savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy. Not because of works done by us in righteousness. Before we are in Christ, we are constantly trying to justify our own existence. We must ceaselessly assert our worth. Only the experience of the deep love of Jesus can free us from that treadmill.

One of my college roommates was a premed student. He studied all the time. It paid off because he's had a great career in radiology. But in his drivenness, he was always stunned by my apparent lack of a study ethic. He'd come home to find me listening to music or talking with friends about the meaning of life. He'd ask in an acid voice, "So what have you done today to justify your existence?" I'd try to deflect my guilt back to him by insisting, "Not much. But so what? I'm living in Christian freedom!"

All these years later, we've come to realize that we were both right and both wrong. All his life my friend had slaved at his studies to prove to his demanding father that he was worth something. At the height of his career, he realized that not all the success in the world could actually silence the feeling that he wasn't worth very much. But when he had a profound encounter with the love of Jesus Christ, he discovered what he had been missing. Jesus loved him out of sheer mercy and kindness. When my friend cast himself on that mercy, he no longer needed to justify himself. He was free. Not surprisingly, he began to devote more and more time to giving away his medical skills on mission trips. Love created loving action, not to justify his life but to express his gratitude.

I had discovered Christian freedom early on. My own legalism had given way to rejoicing in the profound embrace of Christ. But then I had turned that freedom into indulgence. And quite often sloth or hedonism. Gradually, I took back control of my life from the Lord. I tried to become my own master. I had to learn that freedom does not mean disobedience. Christ had called me in order to send me. I had to learn what it means that to whom much has been given, much is required. Not to justify my existence, but to be faithful to the one who showed me such mercy.

Finally today, let's look at the way Jesus saved us. Paul says he saved us "by the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly." Jesus created our salvation in his life, death and resurrection. Then God sent the Holy Spirit to join us to Jesus by faith. When that happens, when someone receives Jesus as Savior and Lord, a spiritual transformation occurs. We get remade. Re-generated. Saved. We get in on as personal experience the salvation that Jesus has won.

The New Testament has several key verses that express this ministry.

- Paul writes elsewhere, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new is come" (2 Cor. 5: 17).

- The apostle Peter breaks into praise when he thinks of this reality, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Peter 1: 3).
- In his letter to the Romans Paul said, “For the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5)

These are ways of expressing that when someone hears the gospel and surrenders control of his life to Jesus, he is born again. Washed clean of sins. Given a heart for a God. He receives a heart that can know he is loved by God. And therefore, he can begin to love others, even those who have hurt him.

Paul just cannot contain himself as he describes this miracle of transformation. We can get off the treadmill of self-justification and constant defense of ourselves. Rather, justified in Christ, we realize that we are not self-made people. We are heirs of the king. Our inheritance is eternal life in loving communion with God and one another.

We have treasure in Christ. We have all we have ever longed for. But it can become almost too good to be true. Paul knows we lose sight easily of who we are. We fall back into the old life of malice, disorder, selfishness and envy. We fall back into old habits. So he tells Titus, “Insist on these things. Don’t let them slip back into the self as center. Remind them that they are in Christ in order to live for Christ. They are called to good works. They are called to lives of love as people made new in grace. Not to earn God’s favor but to express God’s favor.

In Romans, Paul would say it this way, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:3). Alone, we can’t help but live in malice, envy, hate and disorder. But in Christ, we have been made new. Now we can walk in that newness of life. We are to be different than we used to be. By living from Christ Jesus. By living outward towards others for the sake of Christ.