

Psalm 32

The Joy of Forgiveness

- ¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- ²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- ³While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up^[a] as by the heat of summer.
- ⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.
- ⁶Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress,^[b] the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
- ⁷You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.
- ⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- ⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;^[a] even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view,^[b] we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,^[c] not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

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Weighty Words: Sin, Forgiveness, and Salvation

Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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Sin... Forgiveness... Salvation... These truly are weighty words, aren't they? We grasp at them with poetry –like the psalmist. We yearn to believe that our old lives are truly gone and the new life has begun in Christ. We want to be saved, not because it makes us better than somebody else, but because salvation, at the very heart of the matter, is just another word for belonging. We want to know we are loved even as the messed up human beings that we are, that we don't have to suffer endlessly with debilitating shame, and that we belong body and soul, mind and heart and spirit to the God who really does love us – THAT MUCH.

So if we've been paying attention, even a little bit, to sermons and anthems and hymns and the kind of stuff that has been recorded, repeatedly, in scripture by people who were just as messed up as we are, we will likely sense a pattern at work here, the same pattern that we find in the events of Jesus' life especially as told through the events of Holy Week. We will discover the same pattern that's been at work in the lives of good Christians, and so-so Christians, and back and forth Christians since the events of Christ's life and death and resurrection became THE defining story of our faith. And I also want to remind you today that the ONE story, Jesus' story, became many, many stories, as many as there have been and will be Christians in the future. Let me show you what I mean by that as we open up these weighty words.

Sin: We sin. We deny. We betray. We crucify. We run away. We hide. We forget who Jesus calls us to be. We go off track with the same kind of sin that we swore we wouldn't do just

last week. It's true. Paul talks about that too. The thing we don't want to do, we do, and the thing that we could have done to be more loving and kind, we didn't take the time to do.

Forgiveness: We are forgiven. By God... By a friend... Because of Jesus... Because we asked... When we never asked. I was forgiven, and it made my soul hurt. Because then I really knew how wrong I was. Forgiveness is the first death. When we are forgiven, and we really feel it, it changes who we are, fundamentally. In Christ, we are a new creation. The old self dies. It is painful, and scary, and real. The cup of forgiveness can be difficult to drink.

Salvation: We are saved. What does that even mean? Probably something quite different for each of us. Now, that's a radical thing for me to say. The church has often benefitted from defining salvation in much narrower terms than that. Salvation means a ticket to heaven. Salvation means that Jesus paid the price for your sins and you should feel pretty guilty about that. Salvation means that priests and paid clergy get to tell you what it means. Salvation is for the fortunate ones who have heard the good news. Culturally it's more popular to talk about getting saved just once. But belonging is something we yearn to feel a million times over.

These words are complex because the feelings, and actions, and understandings they portray are even more complex. The judgment that comes from being told that we are getting these words "wrong" has wounded so many people. We say we know what sin is – but we're better at pointing out someone else's sin than admitting our own. We say we know what forgiveness is – but hold onto grudges with tight fists. We say we know what salvation is – but then we pretend like it's rare and special, and is only meant for those who can be good all the time. And yet, I believe that God earnestly desires salvation for absolutely everyone. If salvation is about belonging – and I know in my heart that it is – then it is our destiny as human beings.

Jesus kept pointing that out, and we made it into something else, something harder than it is, and lesser than it should be.

We make salvation hard. You have to believe this statement 100%, join a church, come on most Sundays, and follow all these rules. And sometimes we still don't feel adequate after. We don't want to tell our friends how we missed the mark. We don't want to get the question of why haven't we been here if we miss a few weeks. We don't want to express our doubts, or say that our prayer life has been dried up for some time now. When it's about salvation – or else, then it's hard to admit that we're not fully with the program. But that's not really what church is about, is it? If the church isn't doing its job to connect folks, to make the practices real, to pick us up, or challenge us, or renew us, then the qualifications put on this thing called salvation don't mean all that much. And that's when people vote with their feet. If salvation is only merited by keeping up with a set of rigid guidelines that are impossible to meet, church people will either have to claim absolute certainty and moral superiority, or fall away because they can't.

So I think salvation has to be a gift, something much greater and more wonderful than meeting some denomination's definition of doing Christianity the right way. The way I see it is that salvation is this really big, really great love from God that we all get to participate in. Maybe we just need some different words to remind us of that blessing. And I have found that shame researcher Brene Brown has a vocabulary for these kinds of things that I really like. Of course her research has been more into the emotional life than spirituality, but her work has implications for both. She is quick to remind her readers that love and shame are weighty words that defy easy definitions as well.

In her book, “The Gifts of Imperfection,” she leans into these complex definitions. She bases them on hundreds and hundreds of stories that she compiles, collects, and codes. But since I’ve told you that I already like equating the spiritual word “Salvation” with “Belonging.” which is one of the defining words of her research, I’ll tell you what she has to say. Specifically, she defines the difference between fitting in and belonging, and I think it quite neatly sums up this difference I’m trying to get at with the word salvation.

She writes, “Most of us use the terms fitting in and belonging interchangeably, and like many of you, I’m really good at fitting in. We know exactly how to hustle for acceptance. We know what to wear, what to talk about, how to make people happy, what not to mention – we know how to chameleon our way through the day.

One of the biggest surprises in this research was learning that fitting in and belonging are not the same thing, and, in fact, fitting in gets in the way of belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn’t require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are.” (Brown, p 25)

Then she points out three truths about the connection between love and belonging: *Love and belonging will always be uncertain. Love belongs with belonging. And a deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all women, men, and children.* (Brown, p. 25-26)

When I read those pages, it was an aha moment for me. We’ve made salvation about fitting in, when it really is a matter of belonging. We use salvation as an “in” or “out” clause in Christianity. Maybe less in our denomination than in some others, but it gets thrown around that way anyhow.

Our authenticity, perhaps, is way more important than our ability to fit in and follow. That's been a subtext of scripture that we sometimes forget. We look at all the rules and boundaries and guidelines on the surface, and forget that God loved us so deeply that we cannot shake loose the divine, even when we've strayed pretty far from the flock.

So as we get closer to Holy Week, when sin seems so very close, and forgiveness impossible, remember that these events aren't calling us to fit in, they are calling us to belonging. If Jesus died so I could be a cultural Christian, that's not much. In fact, that sounds a lot like blasphemy to me. Jesus' death has to mean so much more. I think it calls to us to quit the hustle for fitting in, and be our authentic selves, to love our authentic selves, because that's who God has always loved. God loves us as we are – even in Peter's denial, maybe even in Judas' betrayal. That's how important this story is. That's how deep the forgiveness goes. Jesus asks for it from the cross. What wondrous love. What an amazing sense of belonging and purpose. We are saved. We are whole. And we are God's. Amen.