

No Other Name (Acts 3:1-10 and 4:5-12)

The prosperity gospel teaches that God will reward those who love him with fat bank accounts. That's not what today's lesson teaches. When a man, lame from birth, asks Peter and John for money, they say, "We don't have any, but we will give you what we do have." What they had was the love of God in Christ Jesus that makes people whole. They take his hand and raise him to his feet and now he can walk. Incredible! So what does he do? He enters the temple, "walking and leaping and praising God." The religious authorities, offended by the apostles, demanded to know by what power this man could walk. They said it was by the "name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth." They went on to elaborate, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name.

We know that our life is sustained by water. Without water we would all die and our planet would be a lifeless desert. Life is a wonderful gift that is sustained by God's goodness, but that goodness does not exist in a vacuum. It is sustained by water, for there is no other substance that can take its place. The same could be said of air. Without oxygen, 99 percent of all living creatures on earth would die. There is no other substance by which our lives are sustained. In the same way, there is no other power by which people are made whole other than the love we see demonstrated in Jesus Christ, "for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." When the apostles say "the name of Jesus" they were not simply referring to five letters strung together on a page. They were not talking about the sound our lips make when we speak the word "Jesus." They were talking about the life of the man who bore that name. They are talking about the love of God which reached out and embraced a prostitute and lifted from her the burden of ostracism and shame, so much so that she washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. They are talking about the love of God that healed the daughter of a foreigner and never asked her to change her religion, but only said her faith was greater than any he had seen in Israel. And beyond Jesus, they are talking about the grace of God in Christ, that loves the world, forgives sinners, seeks justice for the oppressed, and unity for all humankind. When they say there is no salvation apart from this name, they are affirming there is the only way anyone is made whole or forgiven is by the gracious nature of God seen clearly in Jesus Christ. "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds on the believer's ear. It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds and drives away his fear."

When I was working on learning to preach better, one of our assignments was to preach about the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. The only thing I really remember now about that class was the horror with which one of the members of our class reacted to the story. I don't remember know whether she was abused as a child or whether she witnessed day after day in her counseling and work with victims of abuse the terrible pain and trauma that it leaves behind. What I remember is that she had a serious problem promoting any verse that would hold up as a positive role model someone who was willing, for any reason, to plunge a knife into their helpless child. Parents, by definition, are people who are to love their children. That leads us to the realization that the power of a name is not in the letters, but in the life behind those letters. The name

“Father”, for example means one thing to a child whose home was loving and nurturing. The name “Father” means something totally different to the child whose father was drunk and abusive, who beat him regularly without cause and beat his mother. Same word – “Father” but how completely different the reality for the first child than for the second. The name Jesus can be pasted onto a dictator who is abusive and controlling, but power that is Jesus is the power of transforming love.

Campus Crusade has a little booklet out that shows Jesus as the bridge between God and us. Christ is the bridge that carries people out of darkness into light, out of brokenheartedness into healing, out of despair and into hope. Some would like to put a toll gate on the bridge and block all traffic except cars with Christian license plates. “If you believe in Jesus, you can cross and be safe, but if you do not believe in Jesus you are stuck on the wrong side of the bridge.” There is nothing in the Bible that demands that we interpret Christ’s saving love in this way. In fact, there are many verses that argue against such narrowness. Paul says, “As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.” In other words, all of us will ultimately die, and our bodies return to dust because we inherit our human frailty from our earliest ancestor. In the same way through Christ God will make all of us to live. There are people to today, I have been led to believe, that still believe that the earth is flat, and that if you walk far enough you will reach the edge and fall off. That doesn’t keep the round earth on which we live from supporting their feet and holding up their houses and keeping them safe on a flight around the world. There may be people who do not believe in oxygen. They may believe that it is some magic elixir that keeps them alive. Still, every time they take a breath, it is the oxygen in which they do not believe that keeps them alive. People may be wicked and spiteful, yet God’s makes God’s rain to fall on the just and the unjust. It is not their goodness or badness that sustains their life, but God’s gracious provision. The grace of God in Christ is the only thing that gives us safety in this life and the next, but that does not mean that others who believe in something or someone else will find that God yanks the carpet of God’s grace out from beneath their feet. To believe that Jesus is the only name that undergirds everything that is good and holy does not mean that we must believe that only those who worship Christ will benefit from God’s provision or that everyone who in this life rejects Christ will be damned. There is nothing that I know of in Scripture that says that Buddhists and Christians cannot both be supported by the bridge which is God’s love made real in Jesus Christ. The Bible does affirm, and we believe, that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is what makes us whole, just as the air we breathe and the water we drink keeps gives us life.

The assumption that everyone who does not confess the name of Christ during their life will be punished forever by God is a terrible and dangerous and wrong idea. There are many huge problems with this understanding of God’s grace. It leads to making the hope of reward and the fear of punishment the main motivation for everything that people do. It leads people to use the promise of heavenly reward and the fear of damnation as tools to manipulate others, to coerce them into a belief that is not their own. Quite frankly the good news of the Gospel is hardly very good news if it means that the vast majority of humanity will spend their lives in torment and agony and torture and loneliness. And it makes God into someone who is far more wicked than Hitler or Idi Amin could ever be. This assumption has been the foundation of the great abuses of the Christian faith throughout history. It led to the physical torture of the

inquisition. It led to the burning of Servetus by the governing Body or John Calvin's Geneva. It led to hysteria and the burning of witches in Salem. It is reflected in the angry cries of those who stand outside churches where people have died from AIDS, shouting that they will burn in hell forever. These abuses have given the church a bad name in the world. Besides that, the use of fear of damnation as a motivation to believe just plain doesn't work. Those frightened to the altar usually repent of their commitment and find themselves more resistant than ever to God's love and grace in Christ. The idea that somehow the grace of God in Christ, the the bedrock on which healing and forgiveness are built, somehow must divide people eternally into haves and have not is dangerous and wrong.

Does that mean that all religions are the same? Of course not. Different faiths teach radically different things. And believing differently makes people act differently. It matters a great deal what we believe and how we live. In the Old Testament some people believed that God was an angry God who demanded that they burn their children alive if they wanted to earn his favor. How radically different that belief is from faith that watches as God gathers little children on his lap and pronounces a curse on anyone that would harm them. It is often said that we become like what we worship. How different the life of one who worships Idi Amin, than the life of one who worships God in Christ.

We are saved by faith. And what is faith, but believing that God loves us more than we love ourselves, and that we can trust that God would never torture anyone throughout all eternity for anything. It is trusting that the power of God in Christ is far greater than we can begin to know. We do not know, I do not know that everyone will be "saved." But how can we doubt that the power of God love in Christ, given an eternity to work, might melt and change even the most stubborn heart. We sing songs about the power of the blood. How do we dare then think that somehow when a person dies, that sacrifice is suddenly rendered powerless? It was God's power that gave us life. It is God's power, and not our own, that brings us wholeness!

I don't guess that many who grew up in Presbyterian churches have heard this question very often, but in other denominations it was a question heard all the time. And it goes like this: "If you were to die tonight, where would you spend eternity?" Faith is trusting that because of what we see in Jesus Christ, we don't have to worry about eternity. The far more important question is, "If you live tomorrow, what kind of life will you lead?"

It was the desire for healing that drew lepers to cry out to Jesus. It was the experience of healing that brought one of them back to say thanks. A man, lame from birth, was made whole by the power of Jesus' name. We are people who are made whole by God's love in Christ. The story of this lame man is our story. We too can come into the temple walking and leaping and praising God. God's gracious love is our strength and joy. Let us seek to be gracious people, who draw others by winsomeness.