

**“To Save Sinners”** [I Timothy 1:15]

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(Ref: A paper with the same title by The Reverend Dr. Barry H. Downing)

***The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost.***

Today is the second Sunday of the Advent, 2017. Actually, it is the second Sunday of the cycle of the Christian year. This is a time of preparation moving towards the celebrated arrival of Baby Jesus, and for us, Christmas. So today as we continue our journey in Advent, I would like us to be reminded just why Jesus came to earth.

*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.* For those of us who have spent most of our life in the church, these words offer a good summary of our biblical faith. When you become a member of the PCC, you are asked, *Who is your Lord and Saviour?* We answer, *Jesus Christ is my Lord and Saviour.* OR – *Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Saviour?* To which the answer is, *YES.* This is our Presbyterian mini-creed. This is the Presbyterian litmus test that determines if you are a Christian. The details can come later.

One strange detail of this text is that it has had a tremendous impact on the mind of the church across the centuries, yet it is only in this Epistle that these words appear this way: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.* The image of Jesus coming into the world is more of John than Paul. Saving sinners is close to how Jesus described his mission. In Mark's Gospel we find Jesus saying he is a doctor sent to heal the sick. He was sent to the outcasts and the losers.

What do you think it means to say Christ was sent to save sinners? In the Scripture we find Paul held up as an example of a sinner who was saved. Before his conversion, Paul helped put Christians in jail, he held the garments of those stoning Stephen to death. Then came the blinding light on the Damascus Road, the voice of Jesus, and suddenly Paul *saw the light*, he understood Jesus was the Christ. Then instead of killing Christians he became one. Paul became a saved sinner. We need to keep Paul in mind. Paul's personal testimony was, *a sinner such as I.*

What does it mean that sinners need to be saved? Who are the sinners and how do they get saved? It might be appropriate to respond, *that depends.* Paul's saving was not the same as saving Levi the tax collector. The way Ian needs to be saved may not be the way any of you need saving, this is a fundamental Christian concept but not every church broadcasts this in neon lights. Our images of evangelical Christianity, Christianity in the inner cities, down in the ghettos, the places where drugs and prostitution reign, is the old brick church on the corner and a neon sign that flashes *Jesus Saves.* Many of we St. John's folk would be afraid to walk into some of the ghetto places in most any large city. These places are in every city where many people do not want to go, especially alone. In the movies and in real life it is the kind of place the police are busy shooting or arresting people.



If some of you were to attend one of the native churches in an inner city, the one with the flashing sign *Jesus Saves*, you might feel like a foreigner there. Our clothes would probably not be like theirs. Many cry aloud in worship for Jesus to come and help them. It probably would not be like St. John's Church. It might have a name like, Spirit or Gospel Church. People probably would greet you after the service saying, *welcome brother* or *welcome sister*. They probably wouldn't say it but they might think, *are you lost?* Just by looking at you they would know you are from somewhere else. They would think you are lost and out of place. And you would know it. If you prayed, you'd probably ask God to, *get me out of here safely*. This indeed might be the first time in your life you prayed to be saved.

People of colour, native indigenous people, Latino people from the islands and Mexico have been and still are treated as outcasts. Dr. King confronted the white people with a question that will not go away: *Why can't you accept these other people as children of God?* Dr. King asked a very good question and although now he is dead, his question is still alive.

The civil rights movement was also a salvation movement. It was primarily to save black people from being second-class citizens. It was to save white people from being like Paul before his conversion. Racial sin is still with us. Jesus came to save sinners. Many of you learned a hymn sung to a tune written during the American Civil War – *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp*. Do you know which hymn that is? *Jesus Loves the Little Children!* It was written with two refrains that could be sung separately or as one:

***Jesus loves the little children,  
All the children of the world.  
Red and yellow, black and white,  
All are precious in His sight,  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.***

And the second or alternate refrain:

***Jesus died for all the children,  
All the children of the world.  
Red and yellow, black and white,  
All are precious in his sight,  
Jesus died for all the children of the world.***

These refrains have often been called a song by itself.

I do not think the idea of salvation is preached very much in our white waspy churches. I know I do not preach it with the same passion as would a black preacher. But I often see where salvation is needed.

A surprising number of our membership has addiction and substance abuse problems. Most do not end up in jail or in the newspaper. Sometimes I am involved. Many people have used or participated in an AA group. One of the basic concepts of AA is that a person needs to *hit the bottom*, needs to admit helplessness before alcohol and to confess before the group, *I am an alcoholic*. One needs to do that before they can be changed – or saved.



I do not think Jesus can help anyone unless they first admit they are helpless and powerless before sin. Most of us do not readily or want to admit that. We see ourselves in charge of our lives and in control. Many say they are doing quite fine without anyone's help or interference. Yet part of our ministry is to help the hungry, the poor, the needy and the lonely. Now and then we wonder about the spiritual life of those whom we help, but do we do a better job of avoidance because they do not fit our lives.

There have been and will be more of our congregation who know what it means to fall off the proverbial wagon. To lose a good job; to hit a financial low; to go through a divorce; to have a family upheaval because of the children, and then know too well a sense of shame. We know what it is to cry out because we need help admitting that we cannot make it on our own. Then we understand what it means to cry out to Jesus to come and *save me – get me out of this trouble!*

The ministry of Jesus was to people who knew they needed help. He called a tax collector to be a disciple. Scandalous down at the temple! The gospel makes a point that Jesus befriended prostitutes. If we knowingly had a prostitute in our midst we probably would shame them out of the church. We all want our daughters to grow up and become respectable ladies, certainly not prostitutes. It is not hard for anyone here to think of people whom we can think of as losers, people who are failures in the eyes of their families, their friends and probably in the eyes of God.

Yet life at the top is not always so good. There are stories that you may recall over the years – and even in recent weeks or days. People of all ages who seemingly have it all, suddenly cause their families, the community and sometimes the church to pause. People involved in violent crime, spousal abuse, drug trafficking, theft and breach of trust, murder and suicide. There is a lot of pain going around and we submit that the family and friends standing in the wings need to be rescued from their shame, embarrassment and pain – they need to be saved.

I have a metaphorical picture of life. We are on an icy mountain trying to climb to the top. Others are trying to climb up too. If we get to the top and there is not enough room we will push the others back so we do not lose our place. That was the Apostle Paul. He was at the top of the mountain pushing the Christians off. Then on the way to Damascus to kick and push some more Christians, he saw the light and he was saved. Jesus climbed the mountain and was crucified for it. Paul was converted and started climbing Jesus' mountain and he was put in jail, stoned and persecuted. The problem with Paul is he did not know he needed saving. I worry that there are many in our community and some in our congregation who have not come face to face with Jesus because there has not been a perceived need to be saved. But we have fear. Fear about ourselves, about our children, about those above us, those at the top of the mountain, fears about the government, the leaders in control, or the people who operate the stock market. We fear what they may or may not be doing. We know over the last few weeks there are well founded fears that these people can start a rock slide that can carry us all to the bottom. This rock slide hit St. John's pretty hard a few years ago. Now we



want to get climbing again and I see this in the work and progress by the re-established Session.

My concern as the congregation gets climbing again is that this body focuses on the message that Jesus Christ came to save sinners. Some sinners are at the bottom of the mountain and there are others at the top. Those at the bottom know they need saving because the only way for them is up. Anyone who looks down on another for whatever reason be they at the top, the leaders, the rich, the famous and the powerful also need saving.

How do you know if you are saved? If you can love God and love your neighbour, no matter who your neighbour is, those at the bottom, those in the middle, those at the top, while climbing your cursed mountain, then you have been saved. We need to believe that final salvation is on the other side of the mountain. The Promised Land will not have mountains to climb. The words of Isaiah, *Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.* [Is. 40:4]. May our common prayer be, *Let us see your glory God. We sinners want to see salvation.* Amen.