

## "Walls"

Romans 8:1-11/Mark 10:17-22/Acts 2:37-47

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### I. Scripture

Grace, salvation and faith.....that's the theme of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. In grace God acts in Jesus Christ to save all of creation, and we are ask to trust God's salvation in Christ. In the 16 chapters of Romans Paul explores what grace, salvation and faith means. In our reading today from Romans 8 Paul discusses how grace, salvation and faith mean a new way of life.

**Read Romans 8:1-11.**

### II. Introduction

The little pamphlet was laying on the blood pressure machine in Giant Eagle. I've gotten into a habit of checking my blood pressure when I grocery shop. So as I sat down and put my arm in the cuff, there it was....I'm sure left there by someone as a quiet form of evangelism. The intent of the pamphlet was clear enough. On the cover it ask, "How Do You Go to Heaven?" Perhaps the thinking was that people with high blood pressure are more prone to wonder about eternity. On the inside were the 4 points: 1-We are sinners and separated from God; 2-Our destiny as sinners is hell and the lake of fire; 3-God has acted in Jesus Christ to save us; 4-If you believe in Jesus you will be saved, and go to heaven.

So as the blood pressure cuff tightened around my arm I was thinking; grace, salvation and faith reduced to a pamphlet and 4 points. Is that really the core of the gospel message? Is salvation really only about somewhere else, and not here? Is it really only about the future, and not now?

The cuff released. My blood pressure reading was good. I left the pamphlet for someone else to ponder.

### III. Brief Exegesis

#### A. Mark 10:17-22

The question was asked of Jesus, "What do I do to inherit eternal life?" It was the question on the front of the pamphlet in Giant Eagle. But instead of the points about "sin, hell, believe and heaven".....Jesus says something else. Jesus says something very "right here and right now....earthy." "Keep the commandments" he says. "Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, honor your parents." In the mind of Jesus, it seems, salvation is not just about going to heaven.

The man then presses Jesus. "I've kept those since I was a boy." In my picture of this text I see Jesus stopping and looking into the heart of this man. Jesus knows his

honest question about eternal life, and his struggle. He hasn't mentioned the last commandment about "coveting." He will now. Coveting is a greed and grasping, a drive to want more, and defining life, neighbors and self by what is owned. Coveting loves stuff more than God. Coveting loves self more than neighbors. And when we covet we place ourselves outside eternal life, salvation, and God's present and future plan for all creation. There is not coveting with God.

"Eternal life you say? Then go, sell what you have, give it to the poor.....and come follow me." Now I can see a silence, and an honest grief. The man's struggle with coveting is laid bare. He has gotten the answer he sought. But he can't do it. This is the commandment he has not obeyed from his youth. Salvation is not a way of life or belief. It is a way of life ("go, sell, give") and belief ("follow me"). Eternal life is belief and a way of life in a future age that breaks into the present age. It is an overlapping of the present with God's future. It is now and then.....here and there. Salvation is about the new age to come. But it is also about a changed life in this age right now.

#### B. Acts 2:37-47

"What shall we do to be saved?" It was the question of those who heard Peter preached about Jesus in Acts 2. And again, it was the same question that was on the cover of the pamphlet in Giant Eagle. "What shall we do to be saved?"

So what does Peter say? "Believe, repent, be baptized, and go to heaven?" No. Instead he says, "Believe, repent, be baptized.....and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit? Why "the Holy Spirit?" The Holy Spirit is the presence and power of God for the new age, who has broken into our age. The Holy Spirit is the power of God to share in the mission of God for the salvation of the world. The Holy Spirit is the power of God to transform the lives of those who follow Jesus. Salvation and the Holy Spirit aren't just about going to heaven. They are also about bringing a bit of heaven to earth.

And so salvation in Acts 2 as the Christian church begins is about belief, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is about sharing in God's mission for the world. Salvation is about changed lives now. And by what those first Christians said, and how they lived, people heard and saw God's salvation for the world.

Those early followers of Jesus believed that the history of the whole world was heading somewhere because they believed God had not abandoned the world. A new day, a new age, and a new era was coming. God's salvation is not an escape from this creation, but rather a transformation of this creation.....and the transformation of Jesus' followers signals the beginning of this coming change.

#### C. Romans 8:1-11

Finally, Paul adds his voice to this chorus of salvation in Romans 8. God has acted to save us in Christ. It is done. Old ways of life, that Paul calls the way of flesh,

lead only to darkness and death. They are passing away, outside of God's salvation. New ways of life, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are breaking forth. Life in the Spirit leads to joy, wonder and beauty in God's kingdom. Salvation includes a transformed way of life now. As Paul writes:

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the things of the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” (Rom. 8:5-6)

Salvation is about the way of life in the Spirit.....now.

In God's grace we are restored to a relationship with God. In grace we are given the power of the Holy Spirit. In grace we live new lives. In grace we share in a creation that has hope for the future. All of this is the same salvation.

#### IV. Reflections

“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.”

So begins Robert Frost in his poem “Mending Wall,” a reflection on the old stone walls that run across the countryside in New England. They are walls that mark boundaries, separate fields and flocks, and tell the old stores of “keeping in and keeping out.” In one memorable line in the poem, as Frost and his neighbor are repairing the wall, the neighbor replies “Good fences make good neighbors.” But in the poem Frost wonders about a greater force that works over time to pull the wall down.....a force that shares a greater truth.....a force “that doesn't love a wall.”

We had a wall marking the backyard of one of the houses in which I grew up. In truth, it was really more of a 6 foot high fence. We put it up, painted it, and edged around it when we mowed grass. It kept the neighbor's dogs out, and our baseballs, footballs and basketballs in. It was a good thing. But, I never really got to know those neighbors on the other side of our wall.

There was the Berlin Wall.....separating East and West Germany....  
...communism from capitalism.....totalitarianism from democracy. It came down in 1989. I think they are better neighbors there now.

There is a wall that separates the Palestinian West Bank from Israel. There are walls, fences and barriers that separate the United States from Mexico. There is the

Great Wall of China, built from the 5<sup>th</sup> C BCE through the 16<sup>th</sup> C CE, a 2000 year building project. It is 4000 miles long. These walls are built to keep out terrorists, immigrants, drugs and marauding nomadic tribes. Walls for protection...walls that are built when neighbors don't get along.

A couple weeks ago Jeanne and I went to the Storm King Art Center, about an hour north of New York City. It is a 500 acre sculpture garden for modern art and wonderful landscape architecture. We went there specifically to see a wall. It is a wall made of field stones by British artist Andy Goldsworthy. Storm King invited Goldsworthy to provide a work for the art center. He is known for his natural sculpture.

When Goldsworthy came to Storm King he walked the grounds, and didn't know what he would share. He then saw an old stone wall running through the property, and falling down...more a line of stones than a wall. Goldsworthy then got an idea. He decided to rebuild the wall, but transform it.....and transform what a wall can mean....transform the experience of a wall. Instead of the straight, hard, cold stone wall that separates land, neighbors and community, he built something new. With the precision of a craftsman and the rhythm of a poet he built a wall that gently loops back and forth around trees, boulders and land. Instead of dividing it unites. Instead of separating it includes. To stand by the wall as it loops and meanders around you is to have the strange experience of feeling drawn together with the trees, rocks and people on both sides of the wall. (The Goldsworthy Wall is on the cover of the bulletin this morning.) The whole idea and experience of a wall is transformed. The wall makes good neighbors in a whole new way. I suspect Andy Goldsworthy read Robert Frost's "Mending Wall."

In a strange way, I believe that is salvation. It is the wonderful rebuilding of the old into the new. It is going, selling, giving and following Jesus. It is believing, repenting, being baptized and receiving the Holy Spirit. It is the power of the Holy Spirit transforming our lives.....from old life to new....from flesh to Spirit. It is the poetry and art of God's grace in our lives, and our life together.....right here.....right now.....and forever. That is salvation. It is not best shared in a pamphlet. Rather it is best experienced as a work of art.