

## “What Redemption Feels Like”

A Sermon for the People of Seaside Community Church

Romans 3:21-26 & Matthew 9:27-31

March 14, 2010

The Blessing continues! I am pleased to be here to complete the thought I began last week about the connection between “repentance” and “redemption.” This will bring my effort at Lenten sermons to a close! I’ll be on retreat next week, and when I return, we will observe Holy Week together: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Easter. That will be the end of this “interim before the interim” time we’ve shared—but what a nice “high note” Easter will be, to go “out” on! Truly, God is gracious...

Ok, with the Promise of Resurrection, then, always in our sight before us, we want to remember how we first, symbolically, participate in God’s resurrecting power. In our spiritual process in our life together as church, we first grasp the significance of the Resurrection *for us*, by being baptized. Baptism is that moment when we “die” symbolically and ritually to the life “before,” in order to be “raised” to “new life” in Christ. So even when we may not be so clear about what “resurrection” might mean for our life together as church, in baptism we are always already putting “resurrection” at the center of our spiritual process.

Now, last week we saw that, once we get over seeing baptism as the sign of entry into membership in the church, and begin to recover a greater meaning to it by following what Scripture says baptism is meant to be, we will find that baptism, as originally offered by John the Baptizer, was to be for “repentance and forgiveness of sins.” This is good, because we can now come to see baptism as that *moment* of change, from which follows perhaps a life-long process of repentance. In the course of this life-long process of repentance, God is at work in us, transforming us with God’s forgiveness and God’s grace.

AND, once we begin to see that repentance is a life-long process, and God’s forgiveness and grace comes to us over and over again throughout this life-long process of repentance, then we can begin to understand what **redemption** *feels like!*

Redemption feels like the perpetual realization that God's forgiveness and grace is always already at work with us, *transforming* us, I would say, with God's resurrecting power! In short, redemption is how we experience God's being *with* us and God's being *at work* within us.

I've chosen two Scriptures today to help me explain what I mean—so you know, I think that it is pretty important for us to get a good grasp on what redemption feels like!

The first of our Scriptures comes from Paul's letter to the Romans. If you can find a *more* dense passage of Scripture, indeed a more dense book in the New Testament, I'd like to know what it is! Man! Paul's Pharisaic mind is really evident in Romans—which is why I admire Bob Dye's leading a Bible study on it! That says a lot about his courage as well as his wisdom... And I urge you to join him, because I know that you'll get a lot out of it.

The irony of Romans is that Paul is trying VERY hard to be clear—and it is precisely his effort at clarity that makes what he is written almost impenetrable to our efforts at understanding! Sometimes when I am reading Scripture, I want to harvest the meaning as if it were a truck garden and I'm walking through the neatly planted rows, taking what I need. But when I read Romans, I feel like I've got to take a machete and hack my way through, like those old jungle movies I used to see when I was a kid!

So please bear with me while I hack away! I'm hoping to harvest something worthy of our consumption...

Let's just look at this passage again, reading it slowly, hoping it will dissolve in our mouths like a hard candy:

But now, apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the Law and the prophets -- the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Whew! I think you can see from this why I've seldom preached "on" Romans! There are at least a month of Sundays in this passage alone—and ample implications for doctrine and theological discussion.

Thank goodness, *today* I am interested almost not at all in either doctrine or theological discussion! Instead I want to keep our focus narrow, on our *experience* of redemption. To that end, I want just to look at the word "redemption," as Paul uses it. Bob has helped me understand that *here*, at least, "redemption" connotes "release."

That means, when "redemption feels like *release*," the sort of "release" that captives or prisoners feel. Release means *freedom*—the sort of freedom slaves feel upon emancipation or POWs feel when they are finally freed. Redemption means release. Redemption feels like freedom. Maybe more "free" than we've ever been. Maybe simply freedom restored.

Last week, when I spoke about repentance, I said I was working on the basis of a personal adage of mine: "We shape our lives by what we hold onto and what we let go of." The trouble with that adage today is that I can see that God *intends* to "release" me from my captivity. God *intends* freedom for me. And the release and the freedom God intends for me is how my redemption in Jesus Christ is to *feel* like!

In other words, if God alone were shaping my life, I would not be shaping it by what I held onto and what I let go of! If God alone were shaping my life, my life would be shaped by the freedom and release of redemption.

Ah, so here we come round again to where I ended last week: **what is it about me that I limit the power of God to be at work within me?** Maybe you are asking yourself the same question... (Not about ME, but about yourselves!)

Last week I approached this question in terms of the limits I put on what I was willing to repent of! Taking a page from the 12-Step approach, I realized that my list of "character defects" was long enough! I didn't want to know that there might be *more* for me to repent. And I realized that some of my character defects I kind of *liked*... I mean, my character defects gave me, well, *character*, in that way... So I'd hold onto them... My flaws are precious to me, I found.

Well, this week, I want to speculate along with you that repentance and redemption are *linked*—not quite two sides of the same coin, but they are related. And I'm thinking that they are related in this way: **The more I'm willing to repent, the more I will feel redeemed!** Or in other words: Maybe I am not altogether sure how redemption feels like because I am not altogether willing to repent...

Even staying here in this passage from Romans, and realizing that “redemption” means “freedom” and “release”—Bob and I both thought of a book written by the psychologist Erich Fromm: *Escape from Freedom*. Now Bob and I are both “men of a certain age,” and so we tend to think of these long-forgotten texts—books people seldom talk about these days, but we thought of as “classics,” back in the day!

Anyway, Fromm's premise was that most of us found “freedom” too frightening! So the great majority of people seek ways to limit their freedom, to “escape” from it, to be less “free.”

In our context today, I want to ask: *Are we afraid to know what redemption feels like?* Do we try to limit the effect of God's grace within us, both because we kind of like our sins and faults and so do not “repent” as adequately as we could... And because we are afraid to feel as free as God's righteousness could make us feel? Turning a phrase of Fromm's: Are we trying to “escape” from redemption?

If we are, maybe it is because we are afraid of the Unknown. By this I mean, we might be afraid of the unknown of living a God-redeemed life.

Fromm in his book talks about two kinds of freedom: “Freedom *from*...” and “Freedom *for*...”. In our context, I would say that “freedom from...” has to do with repentance—how we can be freed from... our acknowledged sins, burdens, and defects. But there is also “freedom for...” and this has to do with redemption. Redemption is God's way of freeing us *for* service to God. We experience what “redemption” feels like when we feel ourselves freed for... service to God.

But that whole notion of “service” can be a great Unknown. What would our lives be like if we were to be freed *from* our penchant for sinning and freed *for* service to God? My guess is that such levels of freedom are unfamiliar to most of us. Certainly they are unfamiliar to me...

This leads me to the second point I want to make today about what redemption feels like: not only does redemption feel like freedom, but redemption also feels like *healing*.

To illustrate the “healing” aspect of redemption, I’ve chosen this story from Matthew’s gospel. As a healing story (and yes, there are a number of these stories in the gospels; it is its own genre), this one has a couple of elements about it that we might find instructive.

The first is that there are two blind men, coming together, to “see” Jesus. When I read this, I cannot help but think of when Jesus talks about “the blind leading the blind” and how certain it is that they will fall into a ditch! Well, they don’t fall into a ditch! Indeed, they find their way into the house where Jesus is.

So my second thought was that “two blind men” is an apt description of church. “Where two or three are gathered together”? Well, yes, and here we have church. This is not an individual healing encounter, Jesus one-on-one with some one who seeks his help. Instead, this is two blind men, leading each other, not falling into a ditch, but finding their way inside, and pleading for “mercy” together: “Have mercy on us!” *Kyrie Eleieson!* Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy. This is a story about worship!

One thing about the stories of Jesus that are recorded in the Gospels that we might help ourselves to understand is this: In those days, the line between “fact” and “fiction” was different than it is for us today. At the time that the Gospels were written, stories that Jesus *told* became stories about what Jesus *did*—and vice versa. Moreover, there was a different understanding about what was “literal” and what was “metaphorical.” That is, whether or not Jesus actually literally healed two men who were completely, physically blind was not the point of the story. The point of the story was that Jesus had the power to take away “blindness.” Jesus had the power to give us *sight*.

Well, there are lots of ways that all of us are “vision-impaired.” And there are just as many ways the Jesus can accomplish the “recovery of sight to the blind.” We are right to call these “healing” stories, because, well, which of us does not need in some way or another to “see” better. Most often, we go through life unaware of just how little we are “seeing” clearly. We are, as often as not, “blind” to our true worth as we are “blind” to our faults.

The feeling of redemption has to do with seeing ourselves clearly—and not being too proud nor too ashamed. The feeling of redemption has to do with this healing of our spiritual eyes, our spiritual selves. The feeling of redemption has to do with our having experienced the *mercy* of God.

If by the grace of God we are set free, by the mercy of God we are healed, and we come to discover that we are loved, just as we are.

But again here, there is this puzzling contrast between what God CAN do for us, and what we *permit* God to do for us. We can see this in what Jesus says to the two blind men: “According to your faith, let it be done to you.” It is as if Jesus were saying: you will only get as much “sight” as you will allow yourself to have. You will only receive as much healing as you allow God to accomplish in you!

So I find myself asking again: What is it about us that seeks to *limit* the power of God within us?

I am not sure that I can say, but I think that it might have something to do with our *feeling too much*... Here’s what I mean:

I lamented last week that there were not more hymns explicitly encouraging us to repentance. There are some that hint at it, I conceded, but few if any that come right out and say, “Repent! It’ll do you good!”

On the other hand, there are a lot of hymns that encourage us to sing about redemption! The hymns nearly always suggest that we already DO know what redemption feels like, and it is this: Redemption feels like an experience of Joy!

I remember a couple of weeks ago, Love Bachelor gave us one of her inimitable Children’s Sermons, and it was about Joy. And as she spoke with the children, she was all animated, and funny, and light hearted, and humorous. It was FUN to experience her joy! Then I noticed that we adults were kind of giggling and smiling and feeling good about being here at that moment. We might have even clapped... But I noticed, too, that the children barely smiled... Love Bachelor spoke about joy and a lot of us felt her joy was contagious, and maybe

even it would last in us until we got in our cars to go home! But the children were more reserved... Maybe they were simply perplexed that church would be place where they would hear about joy and be encouraged to feel joy.

In any case, I thought to myself: How do we in our life together as church allow ourselves to show more pure and unbridled JOY? How do we come to be the sort of congregation that has a reputation of being a "joyful" people? I don't mean a frivolous people who doesn't take the Gospel seriously, or a shallow people who smile falsely because everything has become so simple and simplified. No, I mean a *joyful* people, a people who know that they have experienced the unlimited grace of God's redemption, and the complete and thorough healing of God's redemption—and we just can't wait to tell the world about how wonderful it feels!

How do we get to be such a JOYFUL people of God that we just can't keep it in? We've just GOT to tell the world about what redemption feels like! We have to celebrate our faith, and celebrate our Savior, and rejoice in all that God has done and is doing in us!

I think we'd help ourselves to be a more joyful people if we sang more redemption hymns!

So here's what I'm going to suggest: I am no singer! I am more like Love Bachelor than Pastor Paul, but I remember my Vacation Bible School days, and I learned a thing or two about singing my joy way back then—so I'm going to ask you to join me!

"I've got the Love of Jesus, Love of Jesus, down in my heart... down in my heart to stay."

"I've got the Grace of Jesus, Grace of Jesus, down in my heart..."

"I've got God's Gift of Freedom, Gift of Freedom, down in my heart..."

"I've got the Joy of Jesus, Joy of Jesus, down in my heart..."

CHORUS: "I'm so happy, I've very happy, I have the Love of Jesus in my heart...  
(repeat)"

Now THAT is what redemption feels like! Redemption feels like we've got such love and grace and joy in our hearts that we cannot help ourselves—we've got to SING about it! What's more, redemption feels like we don't CARE whether we sound good to others—we've got the freedom to sing our hearts out, in praise of Jesus, our Redeemer.

One last thing: I know that I've spoken a lot, maybe too much to the ways we self-limit God's activity within us. So I've recognized that we tend not to repent as thoroughly as we might. And I've spoken to how we "escape" from the freedom of God's redemptive grace, or limit through our lack of faith and confidence in God the spiritual healing of our sight that we might receive, if only...

But I want to say: I don't mean to be a pessimist here or otherwise tuck these little downer or chiding messages inside an otherwise encouraging message. I simply want to do two things:

On the one hand, I want to encourage us to look our humanity square in the eye and see ourselves as clearly as possible. When we do, all of us recognize that there is room in ourselves for spiritual growth and improvement. God's redemptive process has begun in us—and we each and all would benefit from taking off our restraints and constraints.

On the other hand, I want to make an affirmation of God and God's power and grace. If any of us have felt in whatever way we have some portion of God's redemption of us through Jesus Christ, then let us not settle for that portion. The Promise of God for us is "so much more"! Just imagine! "How much more" can God do for us and within us!

This "so much more," this "how much more" is also what redemption feels like! Because redemption is as much promise as accomplishment, in Jesus Christ we are given "so much more": freedom, healing, and joy!

"How much more" of God's Grace will we let *ourselves* receive? ...Amen!