

A New Creed: Part VII

Rev. Dr. Dale Skinner

I believe I may have told some of you this story before, about how some years ago when Maryann and I were driving through the state of Maine on our way to Nova Scotia when, as we approached the town of Skowhegan, we saw a sign that said “Can Do Redemption” 10 miles - with an arrow pointing straight ahead. I have to say that it piqued our attention. What it could be? Was it some religious revival? What was this all about? As we drove along, we continued to see these same signs that began to count down the distance. “Can Do Redemption Five miles ahead.” Then another that said “Can Do Redemption 2 miles.” I have to say as we looked at the signs and wondered, our imaginations were really getting the better of us as we got closer.” What would we encounter when we finally arrived at “Can Do Redemption.” Maybe our lives would never be the same!?

When signs started to countdown to one mile...and then a half mile...and then just a matter of feet, we knew that our curiosity would soon be satisfied. Finally we were when we saw a big sign that said, “Can-do Redemption Centre” with a big line up of cars and people outside. And what were they doing at “Can-Do Redemption Centre? Why people were standing there with their piles of newspaper, empty cans and bottles and turning them in for their deposits and refunds. The “Can-Do Redemption Centre” was a recycling and a repurposing centre! I have to say I felt a little foolish! And I was reminded that redemption can mean all sorts of things in this world. But you know, be it conserving our resources, saving our planet, or indeed when it comes to the repurposing and the living out of our own lives, we should never underestimate the power of redemption. After all, redemption is what is at the heart of what we declare when we say we believe in Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.

Even in our day and age when many people can have cynical views on religion, faith and even spirituality, sooner or later, I think we can all appreciate the power and value of redemption. Many of us are fascinated by redemption and stories of redemption. Who doesn't like a good story about someone who at some point or another emerged out of some

humble beginning to make something of themselves? Or a guy who was relegated to the trash heap of life and somehow managed to rise up again like a phoenix from the ashes? We like these stories because they give us hope. Hope that we can overcome in life. Hope in second chances. Hope in new beginnings. How many reality shows, air vignettes of young performers who come from very poor backgrounds or had personal crises and they see participating in the show as a way of lifting themselves up out of the mire that they find themselves in. Stories with teary-eyed mothers about how little Rebecca was a darling little girl but they couldn't afford any luxuries, then suddenly this great world opens up before them! It can get a little hokey, but it is redemption and we all love it! We eat it up! It is cool. Of course, it has been cool for a long time for Christians. There is nothing nouveau about redemption! The Bible is full of stories that speak of endings and new beginnings and redemption. Redemption stories feed our souls and give us hope.

It was this very essence of redemption that the author who wrote The Book of Ephesians, in this text that Sheila read for us this morning was seeking to describe and capture. Not redemption in a hokey way, but in a real life drama that was unfolding. The real life drama, according to the writer of Ephesians, is about a cosmic redemption that is taking place and has taken place. It is a cosmic redemption at which God is the centre of the story, both the subject and the object of the story: that God redeems that which is broken and takes that which is fallen and redeems it.

It is written at a time to Gentiles and this is particularly important, because what the writer of Ephesians is saying is that the Gentile people are now part of the redemptive cosmic story, the cosmic story that of course began with the people of Israel, who were called to redeem the world. Their law was to become the standard whereby righteousness and life was judged. But now, with the coming of Christ, this is now open for the Gentiles, along with their Jewish counterparts in this unfolding cosmic story of redemption. A story that Christ embodied through his own crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus was relegated to the trash heap of the world...quite literally I might add as a lot of archeologists believe that the place where Jesus was crucified was also the place that served as the garbage dump for the city of Jerusalem at that time...yet then he rose again.

Well, now the Gentiles are becoming a part of that same story. This part of Ephesians was written for those who were about to become initiated into the Christian faith, who were themselves to be baptized. It is a catechism for the baptized. The passage reads in such a powerful way because it restores this great wonder of the redemptive story of God. The Gentiles are now part of this great cosmic unfolding story because of the grace of God. It truly is a redemptive story. It is about those who have been dead, had suffered the wrath of the world and who are now are alive in the spirit of Christ.

He suggests that these Gentiles have lived outside of God. They had lived a life that was weighed down - morally spiritually, and ethically - and that this had manifested itself in many different ways. He even suggests that they had become captive to what he called "the kingdom of the air," the spirit of the age, the zeitgeist, the powers of popular culture and that Gentiles had found themselves gripped by these things, they simply went along with the ways of the world as they had known it: life outside of God.

The picture is dark and gloomy. It is one of death and destruction. It is one of death in its final sense. In many ways it reflects the early part of the Book of Romans, where the apostle Paul describes life outside of God, and the Gentiles had been, according to Paul outside of God's covenant. But now they are in! Now they are alive, and the language that he uses, as depressing as the language of death is, is overpowered by the language of life. He says, "You will now be lifted up. You will be lifted up from the quagmire...from the desolation...from the wrath of attempting to live by the Spirit of the age. You will be taken up into the presence of God, and you will be lifted up! "

Why? It is because God loves them. God's desire for life for the Gentiles was not out of disdain or hatred or anger, but out of love and compassion. Jesus' resurrection was not an end in itself; it was the beginning of life...of hope It was the lifting up of humanity. According to Ephesians, this had been planned from the very beginning of time. This was God's very intention that somehow the Christ would come and redeem to life.

I think it is a marvelous story! Yet often when I read this I feel for people who have reservations about it and are skeptical about it. Some people who are skeptical about this believe it has nothing to do with them? It all seems to be done as if we are not subjects at all

and that we have no role to play. If in fact the cosmic story has gone on and God has saved God's people, so what does it matter? If it is done, it is done. What role do we have to play?

Then I hear others say, "Is it really necessary? Do we really need redemption? After all, we are pretty righteous people, and compared to most of the people around us I think we are doing pretty well. We seem righteous enough. Oh, we have our bad days, but on the whole, we're pretty righteous. We like to do good things. We get pleasure out of good things. Who needs to be redeemed when they are pretty good?"

Or they say things like: "Isn't the redemption story deep down only for those who are just a little messed up, you know, people unlike us, people who are down and out, people who have major crises in their lives, people who face death, people who commit crimes, people who live poor and rough, maybe it is for them that this redemption story is told? It doesn't apply to us, because it applies to those who are generally messed up." It is redemption for somebody else.

The first objection is, it's redemption in which we do nothing; the second one is that it is redemption we don't need; and the third one is that it is redemption for everyone else. But I believe we are mistaken when we say such things. This unfolding story that we have in the Scriptures, this narrative of redemption has a profound effect on us and on our lives and how we live. It has a profound effect on our sense of righteousness and of forgiveness. We are all messed up in some way or another. Let me give you a couple of illustrations that I have found really helpful to understand the power, the tremendous power of this restoration.

I was reading a book not long ago by the American writer, Max Lucado. In it, Max tells the story of how his staff decided to have a party. The only way you could go to the party was to bring some freshly baked cookies. If you didn't bring freshly baked cookies, you weren't allowed to come to the party. It was a cookie party. Max had no idea how to turn an oven on, let alone make cookies! He thought that if he bought them it would be fraudulent, if he bought Pillsbury ones it wouldn't fool anybody, -it looked like he was not going to be able to go to the party because he just couldn't make the cookies. Thinking more about those cookies for the party, he said, "You know, it seems like so many of us have that same attitude towards our relationship with God and to the life that God gives us." We are not sure if we have the cookies

to make it to the party. We are not sure that we are being let in to this cosmic story of redemption, and that maybe we need something.

Lucado describes what the ultimate end of the redemption is. He says it is life that is lived with God, and that it is like a great, ongoing banquet. God is planning a party. A party to end all parties! Not a cookie party, but a feast! Not giggles and chit-chat in the conference room, but wide-eyed wonder at what God has done and can do. Yes, the guest list is impressive. But more impressive than the names of the guests is the nature of the guests: no egos, no power plays! Guilt, shame, anxiety and failure will be checked at the gate. Disease, death and depression will be the plagues of the past. What we now see daily, there we will never see, and what we now see vaguely, there we will see clearly. We will see God for God is the party. God's goodness is the banquet. God's voice is the music. God's radiance is the light. And God's love is the endless topic of discussion. Then, said Lucado, there is one problem: to get into this banquet you have to be righteous. And here is the dilemma. No matter how righteous we think we are when we compare ourselves to one another, and we may think we are pretty good, when we compare ourselves to Christ, we are not even close!

How do we get to the banquet? How do we get into God's holy presence? How are we lifted up? The answer is faith. As the text says, "For we know it is by grace that you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not the result of works so that no one can boast."

In other words, what God wants from us is faith. It is not that God doesn't want anything from us. God is looking for faith: faith in God's loving judgment, faith in the power of Resurrection, faith in the power of God's life, faith in God's words, faith in God's promise. That is what Christ and God want from us. That is what we bring to the table. Faith...faith that we can come "as is" and know that we are loved and valued and treasured by God. Each one as worthy as the next. For it is by grace that the banquet is prepared; it is through faith that we enter it. We are not righteous on our own. If we were, we would boast -get caught up in the spirit of the age that competes and compares one against the other, judging success and declaring failure instead of understanding the value that God has placed on all to give hope to all.

What kind of value that God place on us? To me it's a value that we can have difficulty seeing and knowing for ourselves. But as our Maker, God is the expert and knows more fully our value and what treasures we are. I liken it to something I so often see as I take the time to observe shoppers who pick their way through some of the items at our Garage Sale every year. Perhaps you have noticed this behavior at time too. You know, sometimes I am amazed at some of the stuff that people donate, some of it you think really is junk...and it just turns out that it isn't. I saw this yesterday in the furniture department with an old table, that was probably a late 70's special, it certainly didn't look like much...I thought it would never sell. But sure enough, a young woman came along all bright eyed and as pleased as punch when she found it and paid for it and knew that it was going to just fit right in with the décor of her condo. That my friends is what the hope of redemption is all about. Not for some old piece of 1978, well unless you were born then! But it's the hope that even when someone seems destined to the junk pile, there is still the possibility of life, of redemption, of hope. We need someone who can behold that deeper value and judge us for the treasure we are. Everyone needs a judge like that in his/her life. It's why we confess to believe in Jesus, "our judge and our hope."

And out of this we are called to good works as our text makes clear. Not good works that get us into heaven, or makes us more valuable than others, or better than others, but the good works that proclaim to others that heaven, that God is in our midst as our judge and our hope. We Christians are here in this world to make it a better place. We believe it is a better place when people do not experience the wrath of this world. When we love the creation that we have been blessed with and brought into, when we love the messed up and we see the deeper treasure in others -even when they have been relegated to the world's trash heap, or when we see the injustices of a broken world and we offer the Spirit of Christ. We believe that this world is a better place for those who understand the power of redemption. Because we believe Jesus to be crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.