

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
14 May 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Sixth Sunday of Easter

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Saved by Life”

Fifth Sermon in the Series, *Compassion & Commission* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Romans 5:1-11

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

“Arise, then, women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts, Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly: “We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies, Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.”

From the bosom of the devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own. It says: “Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice.”¹

So begins the *Mother’s Day Proclamation* of 1870 given by Julia Ward Howe.

Did you know that Mother’s Day really was in its origin an antiwar day? Julia Ward Howe was sickened by what had happened during the Civil War – the loss of life and the carnage. And, her proclamation was, in part, inspired by the reconciliation work of Ann Jarvis, who was the founder of Mothers’ Day Work Clubs in 1858 which taught local women how to properly care for their children – clubs which later became a unifying force in a South still divided over the Civil War. “In 1868 Jarvis organized “Mothers’ Friendship Day,” at which mothers gathered with former Union and Confederate soldiers to promote reconciliation. She convinced local mothers to be fair to both sides. They went into camps to treat the wounded and to teach

¹ Zinn Education Project, “Mother’s Day: A Campaign for Peace with Justice,” accessed at

<https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/mothers-day-for-peace/>.

sanitation and disinfection. After the war, local leaders asked these women to teach former enemies how to get along.”²

With a similar mission, Howe, in 1870, issued that Mother’s Day Proclamation as a call for women all over the world to come together and create ways of protesting war, of making a kind of alternate government that could finally do away with [killing one another] as an acceptable way of solving conflict.”³

We need such a rally cry again today, do we not? To remember that despite what our culture of “killing in the name of saving” would have us believe – we are Saved by Life, not by Death.

On this Mother’s Day – as we remember the women who birthed us into being (who gave us life biologically) and the women who raised us (those who gave us life through their mentoring and modeling, their teaching and loving, their emotional and spiritual support) and the women who call us into practices of radical peace and reconciliation in a world where violence reigns and rains – I’ve

been wondering about Paul’s mom.

We don’t know anything about the mother of the Apostle Paul...except that she was Jewish (since Paul, born Saul) was Jewish and most likely lived in Tarsus (modern day Turkey) – since Paul was from Tarsus.

Given all the letters Paul wrote to churches, I wonder, did he ever write home to his mom to tell her what he was up to?

I wonder...when was the last time she saw him? Was it when he left home so many years ago when he was still Saul? Or did he go home between journeys ever to visit? Did she even know that he had a new name? Did she know that her faithful Pharisee son became a persecutor of Jesus followers? Did she know that he had a spiritual experience on the road to Damascus that transformed his life? Was she proud of him for becoming a Christian? Or surprised? Or did she lament that? Did she wonder how his journeys were going – if people welcomed him into their homes, if he had enough to eat? Did she worry about him? Did she know

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

he suffered in prison? Did she know he was lonely and afraid at times? Beaten and persecuted himself? Did she know how well-known he was becoming for spreading the gospel through so many communities?

Interestingly, in the last chapter of the book of Romans, Paul mentions about 30 people in Rome, and among that listing in verse 13 we read: “*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too,*” (Rom. 16:13). Some believe that this “Rufus” was one of the sons of Simon of Cyrene, who assisted in carrying the Jesus’ cross up the mountain to his crucifixion.⁴ But whoever Rufus was, it’s clear that *his* mother had also mothered Paul. Or as we might say, Rufus’ mom, was like a “second mom to Paul.”

Perhaps she was a “spiritual” mother of sorts for Paul. Maybe she had a special room, “Paul’s room,” ever ready with a warm bed for the weary preacher on his missionary journeys? Maybe she made him his favorite comfort food when he stopped by to visit. Maybe she lovingly applied ointment to his bloody

back after he was beaten (2 Cor. 11:24-25; Gal. 6:17) or maybe when his brow was furrowed with anxiety for the churches under his care (2 Cor. 11:28), she offered words of encouragement as a loving mother would do for a son.⁵

We don’t know for sure, but we do get the sense of is that Paul knew the kind of love a mother has to give – and yet, even still – even as he knew that kind of a love, Paul still struggled with his own sense of sin and shame and his deep feelings of unworthiness. No matter how great his parenting, it seems that it would be impossible for Paul *not* to have felt shame, given what he did to Jesus followers before becoming one himself, and though he knew himself to be forgiven in Christ – we all know that knowing something up here (*point to head*) is different than internalizing it in here (*point to heart*).

Whether from personal feelings of shame – or the shameful evil that was so prevalent in the world around him – Paul became very fixated on what separated us from God – our sin. And this leads him, in most of

⁴ Wayne Jackson, “Paul’s Mother,” *Christian Courier* (c. 2023), accessed on May 14, 2023 at <https://christiancourier.com/articles/pauls-mother>.

⁵ Jackson, *ibid*.

his writings (especially the one we read today), to focus on the event of the cross – Jesus’ *crucifixion* – as the moment in which God’s reconciliation (or re-connection) to humanity happened.

This understanding that God sent God’s son, Jesus, to die on the cross (to pay for our sins), so that we might have eternal life is called the theory of atonement. Now I am not God, so I cannot say for certain what God intended or did not intend with Jesus or his death – but what is quite clear to me in Scripture is that imperial Rome, with the cooperation of Jewish leaders who were threatened by Jesus because he was upending the status quo, and with the cries of the complicit crowd...well *they* are the ones who killed Jesus – not God. Jesus being crucified on the cross – a man’s blood being violently spilt until he died and breathed his last – is not something that brought God joy or reconciliation or re-connection with humanity.

I don’t see how God would want any human to die in order to “save” other humans. It just doesn’t make logical sense but it doesn’t make loving sense either. In fact – did you know the first thing named as sin in

the Bible is NOT Eve biting into a piece of fruit? No, the first thing named as ‘sin’ comes one chapter later with Cain kills Abel. It is murder – the taking of life – that is named as sin...as that which separates us from God.

In other words, I have to believe that just like our mothers who give us life at our birth – the God who has breathed life and love into us must be extremely grieved and sorrowful ANY time ANY life is harmed or lost. And if God feels such a sorrow at suffering, how then can that sorrow and suffering and death be the means by which God saves us?

I know many people believe that God “saved” humanity through Jesus’ *death* on the cross...and even the Apostle Paul himself, as he is the first person to interpret the cross event and pen his thoughts to paper – seems to suggest this strongly at times.

But I want to suggest today that Paul was still figuring things out himself. (Just as we are today...)

AND, Paul had a deep understanding of his own shame and the shame and sin of humanity in a system that was

persecuting those who were following Jesus and his message. As he worked out his theology, he was doing so under the strong arm of Rome and in the midst of intense pressure and persecution himself. Of course, in such a reality, one can see how suffering and death would be idealized as the path through which God reconciles or re-creates relationship – because if that is NOT the case – then *why* IS there so much suffering in the world? (That’s a whole other sermon for another day!)

However – there are these moments in Paul’s writing that seem to match the more overarching themes in scripture in the Old Testament and even in Jesus’ ministry itself – that seem to suggest that Paul understood that God creates relationship with us through Life and not through Death. And we get one of those glimpses today.

It comes in verse 10 when after Paul writes quite strongly about the role of Jesus’ death, he then says, *much more surely, having been reconciled, we will be saved by his life,*” (vs 10).

God sends Godself to the world as Jesus is an extension of love to show us what true life really

looks like. It’s as if God is saying, “*let me reach down in as close a way as possible to you that I can*” and in so doing, you will see what my love looks like.

And through Jesus, we see that God’s love looks like calling into ministry ordinary folks like fishermen, it looks like turning water into wine to keep a party going, it looks like sitting on a mountainside to teach about peace and loving neighbors and enemies alike, it looks like telling parables and stories about how the kin-dom of God works in wild and fantastic ways that do not make sense, it looks like offering forgiveness to those accused of wrongdoing, it looks like inclusion of those whom society has excluded – (women, children, blind, lame), it looks like breaking bread at tables in homes and washing dirty feet, it looks like healing people who are sick, it looks like giving water to those we are not “supposed to talk to,” it looks like having a conversation with those who are committing financial fraud, it looks like creating enough food for 5,000 out of 5 loaves and 2 fish, it looks like allowing a woman to lovingly anoint his feet with her hair, it looks like asking his disciples to stay awake with him

in the garden, and yes, it looks like enduring deep suffering with humility – NOT meeting violence with violence, but showing radical love and faith in the midst of death.

That is to say, it is by seeing HOW Jesus *lives* and *in living that way ourselves* that we will be saved.

Paul knew just how radical the acts of Jesus' life were. Remember he was born around the same time as Jesus and heard about what he was doing – about his ministry. He was actually threatening and persecuting people who followed Jesus because he knew that ministry was threatening to the established religious leaders of the day such as himself. And yes, it was the event of Jesus' death – that moment of martyrdom – that solidified just how threatening the acts of Jesus' love and life in the world were. But for Saul, and for everyone else in that day, had Jesus just died on the cross – that would have been the end of the story. Threat exterminated. Nothing more to fear.

But that wasn't the end of the story, was it?

The real moment of transformation – of life turning upside down – of reconciliation or (once again) – God reaching into humanity to say “I am still here and I am with you” is the Resurrection. The moment that God says, once again, Death does not have the last word. Life does. *We are saved by Life, not death.*

From the moment God breathed life (*ruach*) into us at our creation, to the moment God brought Life out of Death at the Resurrection, to the moment God breathes new life into the church at Pentecost through the *pneuma* (the Holy Spirit) – to whatever moment in YOUR own faith journey when you experienced a sense of belonging and hope when all else seemed to be lost – we are *saved by Life, not Death.*

How much different would the world be if we truly believed we were Saved by Life, and not by Death?

If we believe we are saved by merely Jesus' *death* on the cross, nothing is required by us in the way of personal transformation. But IF we believe that it is how Jesus lived his life – loving God and loving neighbor – that will truly save

us – then we, too, will be transformed to live in that way.

Sometimes it feels like we have such a low view of life that when we see a problem, our first instinct is to kill it... figuratively or literally. We hear an idea or argument in the workplace that conflicts with how we think things should be done – and we do our best to “kill the idea” or “squash it” or “nip it in the bud.” We don’t want that idea to get any more air time or oxygen because if it does – then it might just catch on and become more popular or prevalent than our idea or the way we think things should be done.

This notion has more extreme effects in our society too. Whether it’s the way we ignore, dismiss, or silence the voices of women by taking away their rights to make choices about their bodies or by not believing their stories of assault or abuse or by talking over them in a meeting and deferring to the voice of a man (who often says the exact same thing a woman just said) – OR – whether it’s our “cancel culture” where we are quick to write someone off the minute they make a misstep

without critical analysis or a chance at apology and restitution – OR – whether it’s a fellow citizen seeing a person who is in mental distress on the subway yelling and screaming and disrupting and thinking that the way to get rid of the “problem” is to put that man in a chokehold until his life is extinguished – killing him while bystanders watch and do nothing to save the man⁶ --- it seems that we have internalized this idea that we are Saved by Death (or Saved by Cancelling or Saved by Silencing). Tragically, the increasing rates of death by suicide indicate that people increasing feel that the world would be better off without them; that we are “saved by death” by escaping this life. The immovability of law makers when it comes to safe and sensible gun laws that would restrict or slow access to fire arms because of the belief that we are “saved by death (meaning ‘a good guy with a gun’ who can kill ‘a bad guy with a gun’) – is yet another example of how we are conditioned to think that “Death of a threat” is often the path to Salvation, or Saving.

⁶ Jaclyn Diaz, “Daniel Penny is charged with second-degree manslaughter in the death of Jordan Neely,” *NPR* (12 May 2023), accessed on May 14, 2023 at <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/12/1175776831/dan>

[iel-penny-criminal-charges-jordan-neely-death-chokehold](https://www.npr.org/2023/05/12/1175776831/dan).

But what Salvation, what salve, or healing or wholeness, ever comes through death? Even death on a cross? God grieved when Jesus was crucified, and so did the loved ones of Jesus who looked on to the cross, and so did Jesus himself who cried out from the cross.

The healing and wholeness, the salvation came, when Jesus rose again – when all the sudden what was the norm of how the world seemingly worked – was turned upside down on its head and a man with wounds in his hands and feet walked into a room and said, *“Peace be with you.”*

The healing and wholeness and hope and salvation came when Jesus walked along a road with some people and broke bread in their home – leading them to a moment of recognition that snapped them out of their grief and back into joy and amazement...remembering *who* Jesus was and what he taught them – *“Do this in remembrance of me.”*

The healing and wholeness and salvation came, not when Peter denied Jesus three times as he was dying on the cross – but when Jesus, after his

resurrection, appeared to Peter on the beach and asked him three times, *“Peter do you love me?”* *“Yes, Lord, I love you...”* *“Then feed my sheep.”* Three moments of shame and regret re-born and re-newed by three opportunities at a second chance and new calling.

We are saved by Life, my friends, even when all we feel inside is shame and regret or when all we see around us is death.

In a recent episode of NPR’s *Consider This*, NPR's Africa correspondent Emmanuel Akinwotu described a moment of hope in the midst of utter desperation and despair in Sudan, where a war is raging and people are trapped in their homes without access to food, water, or medical care.

Emmanuel tells the story of “a woman, Duaa Tariq, who is an activist - a member of a local resistance committee in the capital city of Khartoum. And these are committees that sprung up during, and some before, the revolution and were incredibly important during the revolution and have been in the last few weeks, especially in the context of a real lack of humanitarian support in the country. They've

been helping to pool resources, to be there for people, to coordinate help. This woman, Duaa, really sticks with me because of how, despite the circumstances she describes, is so determined - is so fearless.”⁷

“She talked about how her and a few others have been going out at night on the streets in Khartoum [risking their lives], spraying words “no to war” on the walls and chanting [and singing throughout the night] so that people who are trapped at home can hear them: “...*To all the people of the neighborhood I'm coming as long as I'm alive. You're safe. Don't be scared – [we're] bringing [you] songs to show you how to hold up [and hold out hope] [You are not alone,] no matter how ugly or dark it gets, [we are here all around you.]*”⁸

The difference between this ‘mother of a community’ who is using her breath to sing words of hope through the walls of a war zone in the middle of the night *Stands In Sharp Contrast To* the image of the man choking the breath out of another man struggling with mental illness in middle of the

day on the subway surrounded by witnesses who don’t do a thing.⁹

When will we learned that we are Saved by Life and not be Death?

Lest we read Paul and glorify Christ’s suffering and death as the road to salvation, may we remember that God has always been about drawing near to us in life and that God, after Jesus had died and been killed, drew near to us again in the Risen Christ – a Living, Moving Person meeting us and encountering us in our everyday lives.

We are saved by life, which means we must do all that we can to do save the precious lives of others.

You know, it was following her mother’s 1905 death, that Anna Jarvis (daughter of Ann Jarvis) conceived of Mother’s Day as a way of honoring the sacrifices mothers made for their children. Anna Jarvis was unmarried and remained childless her whole life. Her commitment to motherhood was about the mothering spirit of peace and

⁷ Asma Khalid, “Breaking Down The Conflict in Sudan,” *NPR’s Consider This* (12 May 2023), accessed on May 14, 2023 at

<https://www.npr.org/2023/05/12/1175736572/breaking-down-the-conflict-in-sudan>.

⁸ Khalid, *ibid.*

⁹ Diaz, *ibid.*

reconciliation. She was committed to the sense that we ALL have to care for one another, because if we don't, who will?¹⁰

As I think about Ann Jarvis and Anna Jarvis, Julia Ward Howe, and Duaa Tariq, and yes even the biological mother of Saul and the mother of Rufus who “mothered” the Apostle Paul – I leave you today with the words of Arab-American mother and poet, Naomi Shihab Nye. This is her poem “Shoulders” from the collection *Red Suitcase*:

*A man crosses the street in rain,
stepping gently, looking two
times north and south,
because his son is asleep on his
shoulder.*

*No car must splash him.
No car drive too near to his
shadow.*

*This man carries the world's
most sensitive cargo but he's not
marked.
Nowhere does his jacket say
FRAGILE,
HANDLE WITH CARE.*

His ear fills up with breathing.

*He hears the hum of a boy's
dream deep inside him.*

*We're not going to be able
to live in this world
if we're not willing to do what
he's doing with one another.*

*The road will only be wide.
The rain will never stop falling.*

As the rain of war and violence and despair fall all around us, let us – as followers of Christ – remember – that We are saved by Life. Life that chooses, again and again, to rise and to carry and companion one another.

Amen.

¹⁰ History.com Editors, “Mother’s Day 2023,” *History Channel* (12 May 2023), accessed on May 14, 2023 at <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/mothers-day>.