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**“Work out your own salvation and shine in the world”
Philippians 2**

Today we begin the second installment of a sermon series on the book of Philippians. But, before I begin the message, I want to extend two invitations. The first is to those who were not here last Sunday. If you are interested, please consider looking on our website for the background information I shared in last week’s sermon in order to become better acquainted with the church in Philippi and Paul’s personal circumstances as he writes to the Philippians. Secondly, and this is an invitation for everyone... consider reading the entire book of Philippians in one sitting before this sermon series concludes on August 16. Read it from the beginning to the end, savoring it like a long letter from a good friend.

One might expect, as we now look at the second chapter of Philippians, that today’s message would focus on the inspiring and poetic words of verses 5-11, what is usually referred to as the Christ Hymn, what we recited in this morning’s Call to Worship. This passage is the centerpiece of Philippians 2 – maybe the centerpiece of Paul’s entire letter. Over the past year and a half, three different speakers have preached on this passage at First Mennonite, and although it was tempting to be the fourth, I instead would like for us to key into the verses immediately following the hymn:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;
for it is God who is at work in you,
enabling you to will and work for God’s good pleasure.
Do all things without murmuring and arguing,
so that you may be blameless and innocent children of God without blemish
in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation,
in which you shine like stars in the world.

I'm especially intrigued by the first part of this passage – “work out your own salvation.” Work out your **own** salvation! That's a fairly attractive proposition. Working out salvation that fits **me**! A kind of designer salvation; a custom designed salvation, if you will. One where I can be loving and forgiving ...or not. One where I can be generous...when it suits me. A salvation that calls for me to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, give drink to the thirsty, and comfort the sad...if its convenient.

Of course that isn't really what Paul means when he urges the Philippians to “work out their **own** salvation.” But, if that self-serving approach is not the meaning, can we then assume that he is saying that we need to work hard to follow specific rules to earn salvation?” The Apostle Paul, as we examined last week, has many lists of what Christians should and should not do in order to have moral and upright lives. I grew up with a lot of rules, perhaps you did, too. I thought I had to “earn” or “work” for my salvation, so at some level the rules made sense: don't dance, don't go to movies, don't wear make-up or jewelry, don't drink, don't swear, don't wear open toed shoes, give a program at a nursing home at least once a month, tithe your money, be kind, don't sass your parents, don't hold a boy's hand while you skate, don't shop or eat out on Sunday, don't wear long pants or lead singing if you are a girl.

This rule-oriented viewpoint of “working out our own salvation” is no more correct than a custom-made salvation where “anything goes.” We read, in another of Paul's letters, these words from Ephesians 2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works.

Did you hear that?

- God's **grace** has given us salvation;
- Salvation is not of our own doing;
- Salvation is a gift from God;
- And, it does not come because of any good works we have done.

So, we're left asking, then what **does** Paul mean when he says "work out your own salvation?" If we read verses 12 and 13 together, it means salvation - my salvation, your salvation – is not just dependent on us. It means that because **God** is at work in us, and because we are in awe of God – that's the "fear and trembling" part of verse 12 - we want to partner **with** God in the working out of our salvation. Let me try to say it another way: working out our salvation is taking hold of God's gift of grace, and through the power of the Holy Spirit joining God in God's work in the world.

Perhaps we should to pause here and look more closely at the word, "salvation." It is definitely one of those "churchy" words like justification, sanctification, and incarnation - words rarely used outside a sanctuary or Sunday School classroom. In the simplest form, the word "salvation" refers to our being "saved." Saved **from** sin, saved **from** hell, saved **from...** maybe even ourselves. Saved **for** following Jesus, saved **for** the kingdom of God, saved **for** eternal life.

I didn't know until I went to seminary that the study of salvation is called "soteriology." We could spend from now until next year exploring the theological doctrine of salvation - but in the interest of moving this message forward, I offer you what I believe are two helpful definitions of salvation: one from the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*, the other from author, Kathleen Norris, in her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* – a book I highly recommend.

From the Mennonite Confession of Faith, article 8:

We believe that, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God offers salvation from sin and a new way of life to all people. We receive God's salvation when we repent of sin and accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In Christ, we are reconciled with God and brought into the reconciling community of God's people. We place our faith in God that, by the same power that raised Christ from the dead, we may be saved from sin to follow Christ in this life and to know the fullness of salvation in the age to come. (Mennonite Confession of Faith, Article 8 , 1995)

And from Kathleen Norris:

Salvation literally means “to make wide” or “to make sufficient.” Salvation is possible when we recognize that the road we are on is not wide enough or sufficient enough to sustain our life; salvation is a victory over evil or a rescue from danger in this life. In the Gospels, Jesus heals people from blindness, paralysis, or leprosy and then says, “your faith has saved you – your faith has made you well.” It is good, Norris says, that the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospels describe salvation in physical terms – in terms of the here and now – because that is how we first experience salvation – here in this life, not the next. (*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* by Kathleen Norris, 1998, 20)

Okay...back to where I was before digressing... Working out our salvation is taking hold of God’s gift of grace, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, joining God in God’s work in the world. Perhaps we can use the analogy of planting a garden to illustrate this mutuality, this partnership in salvation. God provides the seed, the soil, the rain, and the sun. We plant the seed, pull the weeds, pick off the pesky Japanese beetles, and harvest the crop. God has work to do, and we have work to do. A working partnership.

When we become salvation partners with God, verse 13 indicates that we do God’s will because we want to – quote - “God, who is at work in you, enables you to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.” In other words, we want to work with God because we want to contribute to God’s good pleasure. We want to please God because...we love God. One time when our daughters were quite little, I was sick and lying on the couch. They were in the next room trying their hardest to keep quiet so I could rest. But, I could hear them whispering, and Lara said: “we need to do something for mommy.” “Yeah,” said Hilary, “but can **we** do?” I think she needs more blankets and maybe a snack” Lara responded. I don’t remember the rest of the conversation or their activities thereafter since I must have fallen asleep. But you know the feeling when you are coming out of a deep sleep, and you are aware that someone is hovering close-by? I woke up to find two little girls sitting on their knees, leaning over the couch, and staring at me with big, proud grins. As I fully came awake, I realized how warm I was and discovered that they had spread every bedspread, comforter, and blanket in the

house on top of me. And there perched on the blanket pile was my snack. They were too little to reach our upper cabinets where we kept snacks, but together they found a way to open the refrigerator door and reach into the vegetable drawer. My snack consisted of a few unpeeled carrots and an onion. Their joyful smiles said it all: “look what we did because we love you and wanted to make you happy!” Likewise, because we love God, we long to please God.

Because of this relationship with God we generally find ourselves desiring to live ethical lives; not lives that are rule-driven out of some misplaced understanding of what it means to be saved, not lives concerned about racking up enough points to earn admittance to heaven. We want – using last week’s sermon title – “to live lives in a manner worthy of the gospel” because we realize we cannot really follow Jesus without being ethical, or righteous as the Bible calls it.

We’re only two chapters into the book of Philippians, but already we have many clues about what this righteous living looks like:

From Chapter 1:

- Stand firm in one spirit;
- Strive side by side in one mind;

From Chapter 2:

- Love each other;
- Be unselfish and without conceit;
- Consider others better than yourself;
- Look not to your own interests but to the interests of others;
- Be humble;
- Be a servant;
- Do all things without murmuring and arguing;
- Welcome others with joy and honor.

These are not characteristics Paul chooses from thin air – they are behaviors and attitudes modeled after Christ. The Christ Hymn begins: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. We might alter it to say, “Let the same behaviors and attitudes be in you that are in Christ Jesus.”

Remember the WWJD bracelets a few years back? The “*What Would Jesus Do*” bracelets? Some thought the slogan trite and unsophisticated. Contrarily, if we truly think about it, the slogan is anything but trite. Having the same mind that is in Christ Jesus means that we try to act and respond like Jesus would. That’s easy in the theoretical; sometimes really hard in the practical. On Monday I watched a very good movie called *Mother Theresa*, a 2003 made-for-TV biographical account of her life. I was once again moved, as I always am whenever I hear the stories of the Missionaries of Charity, how these women so unselfishly give attention to the orphans and widows, the poor, sick, and dying of Calcutta. I think Mother Theresa must have worn some kind of an internal WWJD motto etched on her soul. If only half of what I saw her doing or saying in this fictionalized account of her life is accurate, there is no doubt that she had the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

So...with the movie fresh on my mind, one would think that I’d be all set for a little WWJD work myself on Tuesday. Our administrative assistant, Melissa, can attest that something strange was happening that day. By noon we had received over 10 calls or visits at the back door from people who needed food, money, or both, and the requests continued all afternoon. In the 16 years I have worked at First Mennonite, we have never had a day like Tuesday. I think we were gracious and helpful in these encounters, giving out some of the fast food coupons and \$5 bills we keep on hand, giving advice on where to go for more substantial assistance. But I’m pretty sure the WWJD bracelet began to slip off my wrist soon after Mike called us. I don’t know Mike, but he said he had just been released from the hospital with a serious MRSA infection, was hungry, and needed money to launder his clothes. He further said the infection had rendered him weak and unable to walk. After sharing enough details about his infection to make me a bit squeamish, he asked if I would bring food to his house. I said “no,” but I would try to find someone who would do that, and if successful, I would call him back. I phoned a few people, but no one was home. Melissa and I debated whether we

should go ourselves to Mike's house, but in the end we decided to let it drop – or more accurately, I talked Melissa out of our going. Since I hadn't found anyone to make a food delivery, I didn't call him back. But he called back...and called and called and called – some 20 times before the afternoon was over. Since we have caller ID, we didn't answer most of the calls, but we were grateful the afternoon came to an end. But Wednesday morning came, and he still called. Last week I referred to the fortune-telling slave girl in Acts 16 who followed Paul and Silas around town yelling and yelling. The scripture actually says Paul became very much annoyed with her. That would pretty much describe how I was feeling about Mike. So, on his next call – for which I only had to wait a few minutes – I decided to talk to him. I told him he was annoying us with his 20+ phone calls. I explained once again that I had said I would call him back if I could find someone to deliver food. I asked him not to call here anymore because we were busy.

Now you could argue that we made the correct decision to not deliver food to the door of a complete stranger. You could argue that we were actually pretty patient given Mike's persistence. You could say that in this “day and age” we just can't be too careful. You could say look at all the people you did help on Tuesday. But those good arguments, as true as they might be, do not help much, because I'm pretty sure what Jesus would have done for Mike; Mother Theresa, too, for that matter. The last thing Mike said to me before he hung up was: “I'm very sorry to have bothered you; I'm just hungry.”

When we partner with God on this journey of faith, when we give God pleasure, when we model our lives after Jesus Christ, Paul tells us in verse 15 that we will be like shining stars to the world. His words harken back to the 12th chapter of Daniel, verse 3: “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky and those who lead many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever.”

It is unlikely that we ever set out to be shining stars. I doubt if any of us get up in the morning and declare “today I am going to be a shining star to the world.” I suppose that if we are so presumptuous as to declare stardom as our intention, we instantaneously lose whatever shine and sparkle we do have. From my encounter with Mike it is pretty clear that working out our salvation is an ongoing process; that sometimes our stars shine brightly in the world, and sometimes they become falling stars. The verb tense for working out our salvation is called future continuous, which unfortunately means we don’t become Christ-like once and for all while on earth. We have to keep working at it. God’s grace is massive – Praise the Lord -, and I know I’ll get another chance to be Christ-like with Mike or someone else like him. God honors that when any of us fall short of what we know we should be, we are – to use Paul’s words in verse 15 – still God’s beloved children. And as God’s children, may we continue to work for God’s good pleasure; and as salvation people, may we continue to desire to live a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ. May the mind that was in Christ Jesus be in all of us.