

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Rally Day, Sunday, September 14, 2014**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Worried About Salvation? Not Me. Are You?

As usual I was wasting some time on the Internet last week. Having come across an image, I wish I'd saved it but was unable to find it again. The image was nothing more than a picture of a T-shirt, one of those home-made kinds, not the kind you buy premade but made by a person with block letters that you iron on. They read, "Have you been saved?" in big black letters across the top, and then, in slightly smaller print under the top line, "Ask me about Jesus." So you couldn't avoid reading, "Have you been saved?" followed by, "Ask me about Jesus."

Here's the deal: The story underlying the picture is that this guy had the shirt made because he doesn't like to talk to strangers on the airplane. So he wears it on the airplane, and it works like a charm. Nobody wants to talk with him for fear of getting an earful of "Jesus talk."

Salvation Is Really a Universal Concern for Humanity

Now, there's an irony here that I don't want to let pass without comment. It strikes me that, of all the things in the world people ought to be concerned about in our families, our relationships, our careers, those kinds of things, salvation is indeed what we ought to be worrying about. Let me go on record as saying that I'm not personally worried about salvation, and I'm not worried about yours either.

In our general population, however, a lot of people do worry about salvation. It also strikes me that, even if a person doesn't believe in Jesus as Messiah or Lord and Savior or any of those kinds of titles, virtually all the religions, perhaps all of them, acknowledge Jesus as a first-rate spiritual master.

So, here's the irony: If it's true that salvation really is a universal concern for humanity, and if we have at the very least a first-rate spiritual master in the person of Jesus, then how is it that, when you put salvation and Jesus together on a T-shirt, it has become so repulsive as to guarantee that nobody's going to ask you any questions about them? There's an irony here that somehow or other has grabbed me.

Could it be that maybe we've gotten something wrong about the notion of Jesus and salvation? Hence, my sermon today.

Enter Art, trying to set the world right.

Some Insights into What the Bible Really Says About Salvation – The Nine Metaphors

Of all the theological concepts that you can find throughout the Bible, perhaps nothing has suffered more violence at the hands of humanity than the notion of salvation. I'd like to offer you some insights into what the Bible is really saying about salvation. And why I'm not worried about your eternal damnation or going to heaven, whichever it ends up being.

There's a Novena, consisting of nine metaphors that are found in the Scriptures about salvation, three big ones and six little or minor ones. When you look at all nine – I'm going to go through them rapidly – when you settle into your gut all nine of them, you're going to have a sense of salvation that is radically different from the sense that we have in our common culture.

The three big metaphors for salvation are the first three in this list of nine:

- 1. Being Free Versus Being Bound.** This goes back to the Exodus story. The children of Israel went to Egypt actually as friends. Egypt was saving them, but the Israelites grew and became powerful. The Egyptians gradually became afraid of them; things happened, and 400 years passed. The next thing you know, the Israelites are bound. They are enslaved. They and the Egyptians are no longer friends at all. The lives of the Israelites had become so constricted, so burdened, and so hard that they cried out for help. Along came Moses.

The story of the Exodus is one of the primal stories of the entire Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments. The gist of it is freedom. Away from bondage, away from stricture.

But now, with this metaphor as with all the others, all the other eight, you have the physical side of it, which is not really all that important. The physical side is what's pointing to the more-important emotional, mental, and spiritual sides of the metaphor. So you can have somebody bound, as in they're in jail, for example, or they're enslaved.

You can have that kind of bondage of your body, but what it's really pointing to, the center of mass of these metaphors, has much more to do with being free emotionally, being free mentally, being free spiritually.

And here's where it affects all of us: There's not a person in this room in jail; there's not a person in this room who's a slave. And there's not a person in this room who also doesn't suffer some kind of bondage of the soul because of latent fears or abuse or hurt or wrong thinking that has plagued you and me, probably all of our days. This applies to all of us.

- 2. Being Found Versus Being Lost.** Once again, you can be lost physically; you can be lost at the mall, like yours truly, believe it or not. You can be lost in the woods. That's not the point. Here, the primal story is the Prodigal Son. The son comes back, and what

does the dad say? He was lost and now he's found. Wait a minute, he wasn't lost. He found his way home, right?

And you see the point. It doesn't have anything to do with physically being lost. It's the emotional, the mental, and the spiritual loss that his son had until he came to his right mind and returned home. He came back.

- 3. Being Healed or Healthy Versus Being Sick or Injured.** Lots of this in the Psalms, for example. You're wounded and, using the old terminology for it, what do you put on the wound but a salve? It's the same root as salvation. A salve is something like a poultice or some sort of medication in the form of something that you can put onto an open wound to help it heal. And they call it a "salve" because it brings healing.

Once again, the body is just a portion of being sick or injured. There is plenty more disease and woundedness in our emotions, in our mental lives, and in our spiritual lives. So these are three big ones.

We could stop right here, and you would get the picture, which has almost nothing to do with heaven and hell. Really! I mean, here are the three biggest, most ubiquitous metaphors found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament about salvation, and there's no mention of heaven or hell. Isn't that amazing? Being free, being found, and being healthy.

Here are the six others, just to round out the picture:

- 4. Being Blessed Versus Being Cursed.** For the first of the minor miracles, let me give you an example: I am cursed by my relationship with electronics. If I buy some high-tech thing, it won't work. It just never does. I call up my son and he will help get it to work. I can read the directions. I can sort of start figuring out what's wrong and get it to work, but basically I'm sort of cursed on it. It generally doesn't work. Other people are blessed. No matter what they put their hand to, they achieve success, and often that success is beyond what they can even imagine.
- 5. Being in a Safe Harbor Versus Being in a Storm on the High Seas.** The second of the minor metaphors is meteorological. The image, the logo of the World Council of Churches, is a boat, a ship in a harbor. And the metaphor is that outside the harbor there are many storms, and in here, inside these four walls, literally but also figuratively, is safety. A harbor is a place away from the storms. And so being saved is not being in the middle of a storm, but being safe in the harbor.
- 6. Being Vindicated or Exonerated Versus Being Shamed or Accused.** The third of the minor metaphors is a legal one. Right now our country is dealing with some really powerful things regarding race. With Ferguson, with Ray Rice going on, there's a lot of hard-core racial tension. Blacks blaming whites; whites blaming blacks.

Now I'll ask you, what's the thing they have in common? And what's in common is blame. Lots of blame. We can talk about the Israelis and the Palestinians, each blaming the other. And the one thing in common, once again, is blame. This can happen at the physical level such that you're accused enough to the point at which you're indicted and you go to trial.

But instead, concentrate on the emotional, the mental, and the spiritual. The sense of being ashamed, the sense of being accused. In the Aramaic, the root for Satan, "satana," literally means "the accuser," versus being wholly innocent, being cleared, being vindicated, exonerated, being pure in the sight of God, as made in the image of God that we said in that Statement of Oneness, being in other words who you really are in God's sight, which a lot of people just do not believe.

So, on the minor metaphors, cursed versus blessed. In the storm versus in the harbor. Being shamed versus being vindicated.

- 7. Being Among the Quick Versus Being Among the Dead.** The fourth of the minor metaphors is a military one. I always wondered about the meaning of the quick and the dead. I pictured a military scene, and you've got the dead guy and then you've got the quick guy. Apparently he ducked in time or something.

It turns out there's an old English term of quickening, and what it means is to be made more alive. And so a metaphor for salvation, once again, is in this military sense of being captured, being wounded, being killed versus being alive and being more alive.

- 8. Being Among Those Having Enough Versus Those Having Too Little.** The fifth of the minor metaphors is an economic metaphor as well. Not being poor. It's not so much being fabulously wealthy, being able to buy the Buffalo Bills or the Cavaliers or whatever team. It's not being fabulously wealthy. It's being wealthy enough such that your life is not bound. Think for a moment of Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof." *I wouldn't have to work hard!* His job was oppressive enough that it bound him. And what he wanted was to be able to be free.

And these metaphors are linked. So it's not so much money as to be fabulously wealthy, but it's enough money to be free. Money to follow your heart.

- 9. Being Full Versus Being Empty or, I Submit to You, Being Blessed in These Manifold Ways Is Salvation, not Just Ending up in Heaven or Hell.** And then finally, this is the sixth of the minor metaphors or the ninth of the full series of metaphors. The meaning of salvation in this context is full acceptance of the teachings of the spiritual master, Jesus of Nazareth.

One's congregationalism can always take this one to heart. Starved versus satiated. Not being hungry. But once again, don't get hung up on the body side of it. Not your stomach. There's emotional hunger; there's mental hunger; there's spiritual hunger.

So, please look again at the nine metaphors for a moment:

1. Being free versus being bound.
2. Being found versus being lost.
3. Being healed or healthy versus being sick or injured.
4. Being blessed versus being cursed.
5. Being in a safe harbor versus being in a storm on the high seas.
6. Being vindicated or exonerated versus being shamed or accused.
7. Being among the quick versus being among the dead.
8. Being among those having enough versus being among those having too little.
9. Being full versus being empty or, I submit to you, being blessed in these manifold ways is salvation, not just ending up in heaven or hell.

In John 10 Jesus says, in a rare passage, why he came, why he taught, and why he did what he did. He said, "I came that [you] may have life and have it abundantly." You take those nine metaphors for salvation, add them up, and yes, emphatically, without any question, you have an abundant life.

Also, in that same passage there is a metaphor that is one of the most beloved of all the scriptures – the sheep and the shepherd. And what does the shepherd do? I will remind you. He frees the sheep. Sheep sometimes get their fleece caught in brambles and they need to be freed or sometimes they fall down and need to be pulled up. They need to be freed, they need to be found because they wander a lot and get lost, and then they also get wounded and so they need to be healed. Then they get hungry and so they need to be fed. You look at all of these, and that's what the shepherd does.

Now here is the "so what" question: So what? Even stupid sheep realize what the shepherd does. They all know it. Therefore, even sheep live their lives without fear.

Amen.