

Southport Presbyterian Church

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God's Work in You

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

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Recently I was privileged to witness something and I tell you about it with permission. I met with a lovely woman in our congregation. I have known her for many years and we've talked many times. Her life has had many blessings, but overall, it's been hard. She has known betrayal, rejection, and hardship. She has worked very hard all her life. We have prayed together over very sad and worrying circumstances. Sometimes doors opened and answers to prayer came. Sometimes the hardships just continued. By personality, she is inclined to fret and to fear when these difficulties come. She knows how anxiety feels. Of course I don't know the all the purposes God has for her life. I don't know why some prayers are answered, why some opportunities open up, and why others remain frustratingly hard.

And as she talked and as I listened, I had one of those moments of detachment. I knew that I was witnessing something new in that room. I knew I was seeing something. Half of me was listening and half of me was thinking... "What is it that's different?"

There we sat together and she described a new situation, very worrying, very hard to bear. There we sat again, the two of us sitting before the Lord. There we sat again, considering another difficulty for this lovely person who is artistic, gentle, sensitive, and often anxious and fretful.

You know what was in that room? Courage and resilience. I was watching someone who is becoming courageous and resilient. How her soul has developed. Her courage and resilience and her faith have developed over years of prayer and seeking and they are beautiful to witness. It was striking to witness. I thought of the verse from "Amazing Grace."

Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come. 'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.

God wants you. Here's how one famous writer describes it. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* writes as though it were God speaking. Listen:

Give me all of you!!! I don't want so much of your time, so much of your talents and money, and so much of your work. I want YOU!!! ALL OF YOU!! I have not come to torment or frustrate the natural man or woman, but to KILL IT! No half measures will do. I don't want to only prune a branch here and a branch there; rather I want the whole tree out! Hand it over to me, the whole outfit, all of your desires, all of your wants and wishes and dreams. Turn them ALL over to me, give yourself to me and I will make of you a new self -- in my image. Give me yourself and in exchange I will give you Myself. My will, shall become your will. My heart shall become your heart.

Christ died and rose again. That's the fundamental statement of Christian faith. And as he died and rose again, so must we. So will we. Some of this truth happens in heaven. But some of it is happening now. We are being changed. Our joys, blessings, our community and life together, our battles with our pride and our failings, our sufferings and anxieties – all are used by the hand of God. Just like I saw with the lovely woman in the prayer room. She is being changed and so are you.

Imagine yourself as a house. God comes in the live in this house and begins remodeling and at first it makes sense to you. The leak in the roof gets fixed. Some of the plumbing gets repaired. The front door is painted. You knew that needed to happen. But then the entire back half of the house is knocked down, and it seems a large addition, and apparently a second floor, and also courtyard are being built. What is God up to? He is building a house quite different from the one you imagined. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little patched up place, but He is building a palace because He intends to come and live in it Himself. (paraphrased from C.S. Lewis)

Here is another scriptural statement of this same thing: **“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ... it is by grace you have been saved.”** (from **Ephesians 2:1-6**) Do you hear the dying and rising, the crucifixion and the resurrection, the death and life, Good Friday and the empty tomb? You were dead, but God made you alive. It is the story of Jesus, the story of Christian faith, the most basic thing we believe and know, and it's for you today. It's what happened to Jesus and it's what God is working in you.

It's all about the cross and the empty tomb.

“I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20) Paul can write this because he has been crucified with Christ.

The Christian life is impossible to live if you do not know Christ as your Savior. It is impossible if you have never put your faith in Christ. Nothing in our lives can satisfy God's righteousness. Even you don't like a self-righteous person, and neither does God. Our self-righteousness will not open the way to heaven, will not open the way to the heart

of the Father. But when you put your faith in Christ, in what he did on the cross and what God did in the resurrection – then you stand before God not with your own self-righteousness but with the righteousness of Christ and that is sufficient.

You have a choice. Have you made a commitment to Jesus Christ as your personal Savior? Have you trusted in His saving grace at the cross? Have you put your faith in His death and His resurrection to cover all your sins? If you never have, you can do so right now. I was a young child when God invited me to make that first step and simply say that I wanted to be God's child because of what Jesus did for me on the cross. You can be any age. One of our dear members came to this church for many years before God stirred their hearts to believe. It was in Elwyn Stafford's Sunday School class on Romans that they saw that they were sinners and that they needed God's grace. If God gives you that knowledge that you too have sinned, that you need someone to open the door to God, that someone is Jesus, who paid the penalty of sin for us. And the cross isn't the end of the story. After the crucifixion came the resurrection and the power of God for life, not death was established forever. God is the Creator, the Maker, the one who loves life and loves his people. God chooses life and new life for you, not death. But sin keeps us trapped.

Imagine yourself in a cave. Sin leaves us inside a dark cave, separated from light and life and God. When that stirring comes in your heart, that is the work of God in you. That is the gift of faith. On Easter Sunday morning, a large stone had to be rolled away from the tomb where Jesus lay. For you, too, it may be as though a large stone keeps you trapped in that dark cave and God rolls the stone away for you, so that you can step into the light and new life.

Imagine yourself asleep. It's like being asleep and into the room steps a friend who touches your shoulder, who shakes you awake. "Wake up... get up... It's time for the day to begin." If that gift of faith comes to you in any way, in any size, in any form, recognize it as God shaking you awake for something new.

When we are crucified with Christ we are beginning a new life, where little by little the old will die – and sometimes each little bit dies a painful death. I can cling very hard to some of the old ways that are habitual. Just today a man told me that when any little bit of his ego dies, it puts up a painful battle. But God wants to strip away everything that keeps us from having an intimate fellowship with Him. We move from dead to alive, from asleep to awake, from a shabby little cottage with a leaking roof and bad plumbing to a home fit for God.

Personal and Individual: But there is a very important point connected with this matter; it is a very personal and individual concern. Paul says, "I and Me." **"I am crucified with Christ... He gave Himself for me."** (Gal. 2. 20) This is the glory of the Gospel. The world talks about "humankind" or "the human race" but God, chooses us one by one, one human being at a time. You can't lose yourself in a demographic category, as a twenty-something, as a teen, as a retiree, as a woman or a man or an athlete. No kind of group identity is you. As soon as God speaks, he separates one from the other, and deals with individual persons, individual souls. He deals with you. Remember Paul traveling on the

road to Damascus. He was with a group of people. They all saw a bright light, but only Paul heard the voice. That was his moment. God was choosing him, individually.

God loves the world and gave himself for it. Still, the call comes to us one by one. You know that we expect dismissal very soon and our long is nearly over. We are moving to a denomination that more clearly affirms that Jesus is the only Son of God, that he is our only way home, a denomination that affirms what the Bible teaches far more clearly. And yet, the cross still has to stand before you, not before the church, but before you as a question and a choice. It's not that you wear a cross, not that you go to a church that believes in the cross, but that you have been called to faith, awakened to faith in the crucified one, so that you may say, "I have been crucified with Christ." What a wonderful expression! Because just as you are crucified with Christ, you are resurrected too. The death and resurrection of Jesus becomes your own story. Old ways, old destructive patterns, years of propping of false fronts, years of standing behind blind spots, old ways of justifying poor behavior – little by little those old ways die, they are crucified. Little by little, new ways with more truth, more honesty, more courage, more resilience, more strength, more virtue, more honor are born in you.

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Friends, has he appeared to you also? Is God stirring something in you? Are you being called again or called for the first time to put your faith, to state your faith in Christ? There are two answers to such moments. Yes or no. Will you say yes to the Lord?