

No Excuses

Deut. 6:4-7.
Matt. 22:1-6
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What must I do to be saved??? Today's readings echo and re-echo the famous answer to that famous question: "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind . . . and thy neighbor as thyself." But in secular Western culture, the question "what must I do to be saved?" has been displaced by the question "What must I do . . . to succeed?" What must I do to be published? What must I do to be promoted? What must I do to be ordained?

Questions like these follow us around like shadows. Such questions are spiritually dark, and the darkness of them awakens us in the night, pulling us down and ever further down, deeper and deeper into a midnight gloom that shadows our souls all the next day.

The Great Commandment can dispel shadows like these. The Great Commandment can rescue us from those midnight bouts of anxiety and ambition and despair. We are called to love and to serve, not to triumph and to succeed. We are called to accept a love beyond rational comprehension as the remedy for human fears and for human drives that also exceed rational comprehension. The Great Commandment is not simply a commandment. It is also a revelation of who God is. God is the fullness of an eternal and incomprehensible love, and we are made in the image of God. The Great Commandment calls us to be who we are, which is to say to give up caustic ambition, costly pretense, and well-disguised insecurities.

One summer morning in the late 80s, as I walked from car across the lawn to my front door, it dawned on me that if I had nothing to prove to God then I had nothing to prove to anyone. And if I had nothing to prove to anyone, then why was I working like a maniac and worrying about all of it besides?

For a moment the whole world stood still. So did I--a neighbor called to me from across the street, wanting to know if I was okay. I had stood there long enough for the dew to

soak all the way through my sneakers, like some strange baptism immersing me in a whole new vision of life. And then of course I had to "take off my shoes" . . .

Maybe this sounds like an intriguing and wonderful experience. Let me assure you it was not. If we get it through our thick heads that we have nothing whatsoever to prove to God, and therefore we have nothing to prove to one another, three things happen. At least three things! First, we lose all our ordinary excuses. "I can't do that" we say to ourselves. "I can't risk that." Secretly we fear that failure would be devastating. We'd be annihilated if we failed to prove ourselves to someone we had put in the place of God. Or we fear controversy, afraid of being swept away by anger or by conflict. So our excuses keep us safe. Our excuses hide us, and our excuses disguise what we don't have courage to face.

Secondly, without all these comfortable, familiar excuses, we do start taking chances. We say things, do things, ask questions, challenge received ideas and established authorities. It's not that we have suddenly become gutsy and self-possessed. It's that all of a sudden none of our excuses will hold water. The walls behind which we have hidden for all our lives are suddenly gone. All the usual excuses don't succeed in stopping us as they used to--and so there we are, doing and daring and saying what we think. And surviving the consequences. I find that just as unnerving, because all my familiar excuses unravel even further.

I know that plenty of people here think I'm remarkably daring. My work has a certain reputation for boldness. But the truth is I miss my excuses and all the shelter they provided. Nobody ever says this, but I think that grace can be very nasty stuff. Left to my own devices, I'd be an obscure and quiet scholar of the late eighteenth century, working away on something dusty and abstruse that very people know about. I would never have been interviewed on national television or public radio, nor would I ever have preached--*in a seminary no less!* But grace did not leave me to my own devices.

The most dangerous change is perhaps the most subtle, and it happens very slowly. It can take years. When we realize what that we have nothing to prove to anyone, we start to stand up straighter. We begin to hold our heads up. Notice some time how many people walk with their eyes downcast. Very few people walk along with their shoulders

back and their chins up. That's because most of us are oppressed by the dark side of the American Dream. We are oppressed by the nightmare that we have to prove ourselves, that we have to make something of ourselves--or else we are nothing. And we are terrified . . . of Nothing.

So it behooves us to remember that the Great Commandment is not "Thou Shalt Succeed" and it's not "Thou Shalt Not Make Waves." It's not "Thou shalt stay out of trouble" and it's not "Thou shalt be a nice person." We are commanded to love God and to endeavor to love as God loves--ferociously, fearlessly, unequivocally. Ready or not, the kingdom has come: our fears and our inadequacies have been turned into ploughshares and pruning hooks. Before us lies a field ready for harvest. But first we must emerge from the dark caves of our secret insecurities and stand up straight.

With all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind, we are a new creation. Today, just today, just for the few hours left until nightfall, let us place all of our talents and all of our terrors upon this altar, there to be blessed and transformed and shared. Let us go out of here with our heads up, and our shoulders back, to love and serve the Lord. If we have nothing to prove to God, then we have nothing to prove to one another. Let us love God, love one another--and be not afraid. Amen.