

## "Granted by God"

Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, September 9, 2012

**Old Testament Lesson - Psalm 84:1-5, 10-12**  
**New Testament Lesson – John 6:56-65**

E. Stanley Jones<sup>1</sup> tells of a missionary who got lost in an African jungle, nothing around him but bush and a few cleared places. He found a native hut and asked the native if he could get him out. The native said he could. "All right," said the missionary, "show me the way." The native said, "Walk," so they walked and hacked their way through unmarked jungle for more than an hour. The missionary got worried. "Are you quite sure this is the way? Where is the path?" The native said, "... In this place there is no path. I am the path." When Jesus says in our New Testament lesson, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," it's as if he is leading us through the juggle of earthly existence and saying, "In this place there is no food, no true sustenance. I am your food, your sustenance, your fuel for the journey ahead." And of course Jesus is speaking figuratively about eating and drinking not literally. The disciples know this. When they say, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it," they are not struggling with the notion of actually eating flesh and drinking blood. They know Jesus is just using these things as an example to express a deeper truth. What they are struggling with is that deeper truth – the idea that Jesus isn't just a wise teacher, prophet and miracle worker. Jesus claims to be the one who brings eternal life in God the Father. Why is this such a difficult teaching for his disciples? Seems pretty simple to us, doesn't it? And yet, if we really listen to and wrestle with what Jesus is saying, it is difficult to understand. In fact, we can never fully grasp it – the "how and why" when it comes to Jesus and eternal life and those who get it and those who don't. In the end, it will always be a mystery, a mystery that we hold in our hearts – holding it tightly enough to profess Jesus as the only way to God but loosely enough to allow for his embrace of all creation and all people. And that is not easy. In fact, understanding and preserving and sharing the mystery of Jesus Christ is just as difficult for us as it was for his earliest disciples. Jesus says, "Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me." What does it mean when Jesus says "whoever eats me?" Well, think of it as living in the Spirit of Jesus Christ from the inside out – being fueled by the Spirit. That's what Jesus is saying; our inner spirit matters more than our outward actions. Because it is the inner spirit that gives rise to the things, we say and do.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.homileticonline.com/default.asp>

During our sermon time last Sunday, we affirmed Jesus' teaching that "whoever believes (in him) has eternal life." We saw that belief in Jesus Christ is available to all people. But we left unanswered whether those who say they don't believe or can't profess such faith can attain salvation. Well, according to the teachings of Jesus, that depends more on their inner spirit than it does on the words they use to express it or the actions they take to reflect it. Is it possible for people of other faiths to have eternal life in Jesus Christ to have Christ's spirit working in them? If their faith practices are done in the spirit of Jesus Christ and his teachings, does it matter – when it comes to eternal life – whether they are "thought of" as being Christian, practices or teachings. I mean, it matters for evangelism, but does it matter for eternal life? Is Christ's embrace of all people that wide as to – in the fullness of time – even include people of other faiths and belief systems? And what about those who reject Christ, is there any hope for them?

"I think everybody who loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they are conscious of it or not, are members of the body of Christ" – not my words, but words worth considering. "That's what God is doing today," continues the speaker. "He is calling people out of the world for his name, whether they come from the Muslim world or the Buddhist world or the Christian world or the non-believing world, they are members of the body of Christ because they have been called by God." The statement continues: "They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don't have and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved and that they are going to be with us in heaven." The words of Billy Graham.<sup>2</sup> (You can see the reference for this quote in the print-out of this sermon next week, but it was said in 1997 a radio program).

But how can Billy Graham say that – how can he say that Muslims and Buddhists and non-believers have just as much access to salvation through the spirit of Jesus Christ as you and I and anyone else who embraces Christian practices and teachings? How can that be true when Jesus clearly says, "... Among you are some who do not believe. ... For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Well, the question of salvation for all people actually hinges on the words "granted by (God) the Father." Does God grant access to eternal life to all people, even those of other religions or those who claim to have no religious belief whatsoever? Can't we all think of someone in our lives who doesn't profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Can you think of such a person? Now ask yourself, does a person such as that have access to eternal life?

As Christians, where do we draw a line or is it even for us to drawing the line? Or is that God's job?? It's an age-old question, not only for Christians but for Jews and Muslims and people of all faiths and belief systems even if

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<sup>2</sup> Billy Graham on Robert Schuller's Hour of Power, cited in Context: Martin E. Marty on Religion and Culture, November 1, 1997.

they get along well with each other; what do they believe about the other person's salvation?

For instance, a Catholic Priest and a Muslim Imam – or religious teacher – meet up at the town's annual 4th of July picnic. As old friends, they begin their usual banter. "This baked ham is really delicious," says the priest, teasing the Imam. "You really ought to try it. I know it's against your religion, but I can't understand why such a wonderful food should be forbidden! You don't know what you're missing. You just haven't lived until you've tried Mrs. Hall's prized Virginia Baked Ham. Tell me, Imam, when are you going to break down and try it?" The Imam looked at the priest with a big grin, and said, "At your wedding."

Two friends of different faiths, each following different religious practices. Do you suppose that they expect to see each other in heaven? What would Jesus say – I mean beyond what he's already said, that "no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." How are we supposed to interpret that when it comes to people of other faiths? Well, Jesus actually said these words about Judas. John tells us that Jesus said this because he "knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him." So, is Judas a member of the body of Christ, a recipient of life eternal? Is this something that God the Father would grant, even in the face of such betrayal?

To know that we must look at how anyone has access to eternal life in Christ Jesus. And the answer to that question is found in our reading for today, where Jesus says, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ... It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless."

Regardless of what we say or even what we do, the Spirit of Jesus Christ is able to redeem us and transform all our words and actions for **God's divine purpose**. And nothing we can do or say will change that. And here's the proof.

Judas betrayed the Lord Jesus, and this led to Jesus' execution by the Roman Empire. And on that side of the cross, Judas was utterly lost and hopelessly abandoned. On that side of the cross – prior to the resurrection – even Jesus felt abandoned, saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!?" But Jesus saw beyond that side of the cross. At his death and throughout his life and even now, Jesus sees a greater reality, a spiritual reality in which God redeems all people. And confident of that reality, Jesus utters these words: "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." Words of salvation for all people – those who believe, those who don't, and those who just don't know. "... Unless it is granted by (God) the Father," no one can come to eternal life in Christ. And God does grant it – to all people – through the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. God grants everyone access to eternal life, everyone who accepts the spirit of Jesus Christ in their heart of hearts. And this is true no matter what words you speak or actions you take – as long as your words and actions are spoken and taken in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. (That's why we baptize babies, who can neither know or affirm it, but are just as much in the Spirit of Christ as you and I – at least when it comes to eternal life).

And when it comes to our day-to-day lives? Well, if the words we speak and the actions we take are not spoken and taken in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, if we reject Christ's spirit then you and I are just as lost as was Judas, whether we call ourselves Christians or not.

So let us go forth from this place in Christ's Spirit. Let us seek Christ's Spirit wherever and whenever we gather, whether with family or friends or coworkers or even strangers.

And yes, even in the company of those who see the world differently from how we see things, those whose language and practices are different from our own, even in company such as this, let us look for and honor the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Because Christ's Spirit is **at work in the world**, and it is our job as followers of Christ to be **at work in the Spirit** – to be fashioning all that we say and do in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Gracious God, evidence of your compassionate love is all around us – in a stranger's unexpected kindness, in a caregiver's patience, in a gentle word of encouragement, in generosity of heart, time, and resources; in the beauty of a sunrise breaking through the nighttime darkness.

In the midst of a world dominated by self-interest, power, and greed, your example teaches us that mercy can triumph over judgment, that acts of peacemaking can restore relationships between men and women, tribes and nations, and God and humankind. We count on you to foster within us self-respect and respect for others, and to transform our hearts, minds, and souls through the redemptive work of your Spirit.

We praise you that your compassion is boundless, that your love is limitless, and that you never, ever give up on us or anyone else. May we hold that hope for ourselves and for the world, committing ourselves to enrich, illuminate, and enliven those whom we meet along life's journeys, both near and far. And where our reach is limited, where our resources are too few, our abilities to heal, feed, clothe, and comfort insufficient, we ask for your intervention, Lord. Your words are spirit and life to us, and there are no words that better communicate our need for you and your love for us than the words you taught to pray, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.