

Philippians 2:12-13
Work out your own salvation.

Ruskin Falls, February 3, 2019
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday after Epiphany

TEXT (NRSV)

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

(1)

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

We are going to listen to this same passage of scripture again *next* Sunday, when we will focus on the *second* part of this admonition from the apostle Paul. Next Sunday, we will focus on the words, "with fear and trembling." Today, though, let's focus on the *first* part of Paul's admonition, the words, "Work out your own salvation."

(2)

Salvation is God's work of *delivering* us from the lordless powers and principalities that now dominate the world in so roughshod, so frightful, and even so cruel a way. Salvation is God's work of *retrieving* us from the forces of sin and suffering and death that haunt us here in this world that God created good and that God so loves. Salvation is God's work of *redeeming* us from the clutches of whatever might threaten to cut us off from the life of justice, peace, and love that Jesus called God's coming kingdom. And salvation, the apostle Paul reminds us time and time again, is *God's* work, not *ours*. Salvation is something *God* makes happen, not something that *we* in any way bring about. Indeed, Paul usually is so emphatic about God's grace being the sole source of salvation, that it is confusing now to hear him say to the Christians in Philippi, "Work out your own salvation." That seems to contradict Paul's usual claim that, in Jesus Christ, God has revealed that salvation does *not* come about through *our* works but solely through *God's* grace.

Usually Paul notes emphatically: salvation happens sheerly as God's gracious act, which is to say, purely as something that God *always already* has decided to do for us, and *not* in *response* to something we ourselves have thought, said, or done that makes us right with God. Usually Paul notes adamantly: we don't compel, we don't inspire, we don't move God to save us; God saves us simply as a matter of God's sovereignly free self-determination to be the God of our salvation. Usually Paul gives us clearly to hear: "saved by grace" means that God has elected to be our God and make of us God's people, quite apart from our needing to deserve, earn, or merit salvation from God; "saved by grace" means that God is determined to do what it takes to fit us for the life of divine justice, peace, and love that Jesus called God's coming kingdom; "saved by grace" means that God, completely independently of us, has taken responsibility for our relationship with God and for fitting us for a future with God.

Paul talks about God's election of grace also in terms of the *divine good pleasure*: It is God's delight in Jesus Christ, to have taken *responsibility* for our relationship with God and to have acted to *save* our relationship with God. It is God's good pleasure to be always already determined to forgive whatever about us needs forgiving and to redeem whatever about us needs redeeming, that we may become the people we were created by God to be, and enjoy

the kind of communion with God and with others that we were created by God to enjoy. That it is God's good pleasure to be the God of our salvation means this: God's great *passion* is *compassion* toward us, God's creatures. Salvation is the work of our passionately compassionate Creator.

(3)

So, then, what can it mean for Paul to say: "Work out your own salvation"?

Paul knows that salvation is a pure gift and not a reward for something we have done. So, what can it mean that there is something after all, that we now need *to do*?

I would say it means this: God indeed already *has* elected to *be* the God of grace who is *not* awaiting anything *from* us before going about the divine work of *saving* us for a future with God. Moreover, however, where there is *grace*, there is *work* to be done! Where there is *grace*, there is, as Paul says, precisely the kind of *work* to be done that the Philippian Christians now are doing, working out the salvation that God already has bestowed.

"Work out your salvation" does not mean "work to save your relationship with God." It does not mean: "get right with God so that God then will choose to save you." Rather, it means: work out the salvation – or perhaps better: *live out* the salvation – that *already* has happened to and for you by God's grace.

Salvation *is* by *grace* alone. It is not grounded in what you or I have been like or what we've done. However, grace does not leave us unchanged! Rather, grace gives us a *task*. The task is this: we are to proclaim God's election of grace throughout the world, and we are to work out the *consequences* of God's grace in our lives and in our life together – we are to work out the *consequences* of God's self-determination to be, to all eternity, the God of our salvation.

Paul is saying this: Work out the *consequences* of the salvation that *already* is yours by *God's grace*. God's saving grace already is at work in your life, taking you as you are right now, and proceeding to open doors, to open up opportunities, to open up possibilities, that will lead you to growing readiness, growing fitness, for the justice, peace, and love of God's coming kingdom.

Remember: God did not create us to be God's puppets; God is not out to manipulate us like marionettes, into doing God's every bidding; God is not out to coercively force us into becoming who God created us to be; God is not out to coercively force us into readiness for God's coming kingdom; God is not out to change us utterly against our wills or by breaking our spirits. Rather, God is out to *free* us to choose, God is out to *free* us to will, God is out to *free* us to embrace, the kind of life that serves the justice, peace, and love that gloriously shape and that compassionately reign throughout God's coming kingdom.

You yourself do not know and cannot imagine *how* God actually is going to get you there not by *forcing* you but by *freeing* you. Nevertheless, in the end, God *will* get you where God knows you need to be going. In the end, you will become not merely the person the world has made you into, nor just the person you've chosen so far to be, but: the person God's grace has seen in you all along – the person God's love has been working all along to bring out in you and teach you to become. And, what you now need to *work* at is this: learning to hear and heed God's call to you *through* the saving grace that God bestows. What you now need to *work* at is this: learning to hear and heed the command that God places before you *through* God's saving

grace revealed in the world in Jesus Christ. What you now need to *work* at is this: learning to hear and heed God's Word coming at you *through* the witness of Christ's resurrection Spirit to guide you into the kind of life that is in keeping with God's creative aim, the kind of life that befits the future that God intends. When Paul says, "Work out your salvation," he's talking about *living out* the grace that God already has bestowed. He's not talking about *getting* saved; he's talking about living as one whom God already has elected for salvation. He's talking about working to *become* the person God created you to *be*, the person God is set on teaching you, in the end, to embrace.

Living as one elected by God for salvation – living as one chosen by God for a place and role in God's coming kingdom – means letting your life *correspond* to God's compassionate determination to ready you and fit you for the life of justice, peace, and love that Jesus called God's coming kingdom. It means letting your life become a *fitting response* to God's determination to all eternity to be lovingly with you and for you. It means learning to let God *teach* you who you are in God's eyes, and to let God *open* you to what God is doing to ready you for the future that God intends. It means learning to let God *free* you to become who God knows you really and truly and wondrously are.

You and I don't yet know what it will be like, *finally* to be so free. We don't know and can't imagine how God finally is going to get us there. However, in Jesus Christ, God gives us to know this: God is going to get us there not as puppets or as robots, but as truly free beings; God is going to get us there not with coercive force but by God's saving grace; God is going to get us there not by coercing us, but by persuading us through the power of God's divinely compassionate love, set to all eternity on bringing out in us what God always already knows is best about us, and which God always already is set on teaching us to embrace.

Salvation comes to us as the gift of God's *grace*. God's grace comes to us as the gift of a *task*, the task of *proclaiming* God's election of grace throughout the world and working out the *consequences* of God's grace in our lives and in our life together. Moreover, that task comes to us as the gift of *freedom* for the kind of *obedience to God* that readies us and fits us – and that readies and fits our world – to embrace the justice, peace, and love that gloriously shape and that compassionately reign throughout God's coming kingdom.

Therefore, my beloved, work out your own salvation. Amen.