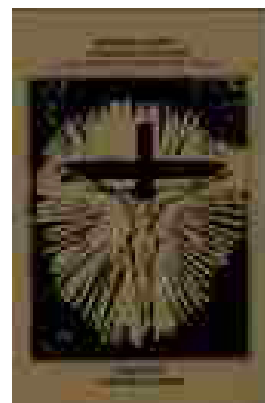


“Salvation in the Next Little Task” Pat Conover



What's the next little task you have waiting for you when you get home? Putting away the Sunday paper? Emptying a wastebasket? Making phone calls to find a volunteer? This is a sermon aimed at helping you find salvation in the next little task, and then the next one, and then the one after that.

My last sermon had the grand purpose of sharing my thinking with you about the new metaphysics and the new epistemology I am writing. This sermon will be about as fine-grained as I can get in pointing to one implication.

Luke provides three lost and found stories in our lectionary scripture.. The lost sheep story has parallels in Matthew and in Thomas. The lost coin and the lost son stories are found only in Luke. I'm going to read the three stories as translated in the Scholar's Text. A collection of mostly secular scholars called the Jesus Seminar believe these three stories are likely to have come from Jesus himself. Since we have so little that is clearly from Jesus, it makes these stories precious.

The Lost Sheep

Is there any one of you who owns a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, who wouldn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one who got lost until he finds it? And when he finds it, he lifts it upon his shoulders, happy. Once he gets home, he invites his friends and his neighbors over, and says to them, "Celebrate with me, because I have found my lost sheep."

The Lost Coin

Or again, is there any woman with ten silver coins, who if she loses one, wouldn't light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? When she finds it, she invites her friends and neighbors over and says, "Celebrate with me, because I have found the silver coin I had lost."

The Lost Son

Once there was this man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that's coming to me. So he divided his resources between them."

Not too many days later, the younger son got all his things together and left home for a faraway country, where he squandered his property by living extravagantly. Just when he

had spent it all, a serious famine swept through that country, and he began to do without.. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to feed the pigs. He longed to satisfy his hunger with the carob pods, which the pigs usually ate; but no one offered him anything. Coming to his senses he said, "Lots of my father's hired hands have more than enough to eat, while here I am dying of starvation! I'll get up and go to my father and I'll say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and affronted you; I don;t deserve to be called a son of yours any longer; treat mlike on of your hired hands." And he got up and returned to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and was moved to compassion. He went running out to him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and affronted you; I don't deserve to be called of yours any longer."

But the father said to his slaves, "Quick! Bring out the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Fetch the fat calf and slaughter it; let's have a feast and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and now is found." And they started celebrating.

Now his elder son was out in the field; and as he got closer to the house, he heard music and dancing. He called on of the servant-boys over and asked what was going on.

He said to him, "Your brother has come home and your father has slaughtered the fat calf, because he has him back safe and sound.

But he was angry and refused to go in. So his father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "See here, all these years I have slaved for you. I never once disobeyed any of your orders; yet you never once provided me with a kid goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when his son of yours shows up, the one who has squandered your estate with prostitutes – for him you slaughter the fat calf.:

But the father said to him, "My child, you are always at my side. Everything that's mine is yours. But we just had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead, and has come back to life; he was lost, and now is found.

(Scholars Text, The Five Gospels)

Traditional Christian theology focuses on going to heaven after you die. The traditional reading of these stories makes God the finder and you and I the sheep, the coin, and the son. We are asked to trade our belief in something that is hard to believe in exchange for God's acceptance. When we say the variously ritualized words of belief traditional denominations offer us a ticket to heaven, or, in the free church tradition, "Don't need no ticket you just get on board."

Instead of being concerned about a gift God might give us

after we die, Progressive Christian theology focuses on salvation in the life we have already been given, in the world we have been given. The Christian Way to salvation can start at many points but one common and important step is noticing, claiming, and expressing thankfulness for our lives, for our world, and for each other as partners and friends. This approach to salvation makes us the finders in these stories.

The first part of finding is noticing that something is missing. Sometimes that's easy. Pain, frustration, longing, envy, hunger, emptiness, hesitation, fear, guilt, and other flavors of negative feelings can all serve as windows and doors to figuring out what is missing. You just have to claim your negative feelings, acknowledge your own pain. The courage to claim the possibility of finding what you are missing, even when that includes entering the space and moment of pain and negativity, opens up the possibility of *mindfulness*, and then *exploration* and *engagement*.

Sometimes noticing what is missing is a significant challenge. We can be *distracted* by tasks and habits, by responsibilities and recreation and our upbringing, and sermons, and other peoples opinions, and how to books. Sometimes the clues for opening up mindfulness are found in places that can seem unlikely: a stiff jaw or a sore back, a headache or sleepiness, a low grade television program or the lyrics of an old sexist love song. Sometimes it can help to get to mindfulness by becoming fully silent so that there is space for a repressed thought or feeling to show itself, for fear to back off long enough so that you can discover the name of the fear. Both silence and healing conversation can be helpful for getting past blockades of depression or hopelessness.

This sermon is aimed at exploring the outer path rather than the inner path to mindfulness and then the choices that lead to salvation. There are times to give up the searches for insight and to gather your hope and courage to go looking in the world around you. That can mean reexamining the relationships you are already in. It can mean moving around geographically. It can mean reading a book you might usually pass by. It can mean a pen pal or the electronic equivalent. It can mean using Stumble on the internet. It can mean deciding to take the trouble to go deeper in Bible study. As Tolkien writes in the Lord of the Rings, "Not all who wander are lost." Wandering gets you out of your current standpoint dependence, makes room for some chaos that can include the discovery of previously undetected or unappreciated opportunities.

We can be blocked from finding what we need for salvation because we are pretty satisfied with the way life is going already. It's not just the problem of false gods and idols, it's settling for a comfortable rut. Being in a rut means not wanting to be bothered with your own needs or the needs, and hopes, and wants of others. We have had a blessing of sermons about not being distracted by too much doing. I've been trying to take some of the good advice in these sermons by cutting back on my doing. I'm putting down some tasks to move more deeply, to gain more vitality and resilience for the theological writing I have taken on as my primary calling. I rather like the cave I am furnishing for myself. It is warm and well lighted and has a good computer. You may have a very different shaped cave or castle or dance pavillion. My point here is that when we feel satisfied it is easy to skate past the little angsts, to not notice the tentative and indirect signals that other people send us, to give only a surface response to a strong poem.

A Christian understanding of mindfulness is the key to salvation in this sermon. The sister sermon, which I might preach for you someday, is the challenge of focus which channels mindfulness in a specific direction. We cannot be mindful of everything at once. Centering prayer gives the gift of *individuation* (becoming who you most truly are) as a grounding for salvation. Mindfulness gives the gift of *participation* as a grounding for salvation (appreciating and acting out of who you truly are in relationships). A progressive understanding of the Christian Way holds individuation and participation in dialectic tension and thus holds centering prayer and mindfulness in dialectic tension. This sermon focuses on one pole of this dialectic tension: mindfulness and participation. But I do not mean to suggest that we should leave individuation and centering prayer off the menu.

Here is a little Paul Tillich story to help understand this point. When I was attending Chicago Theological Seminary, Tillich was teaching next door at the University of Chicago. He offered a public lecture followed by a question and answer session. Some learned questions were asked and answered. Then a little old woman in tennis shoes, a real person not a stereotype, asked, "Do you pray, Dr. Tillich." The learned part of the audience snickered a little. Professor Tillich smiled at the woman, thanked her for her question, and answered, "Always and never."

His answer has been a remembered reference for me ever since. It suited me originally because I was hostile to my earliest teaching about prayer in a Presbyterian church. It sounded like ridiculous magic to me. The deal, as I understood it then, was "Do this little ritual whether you understand it or not and God will treat you right." Later on I graduated to a

progressive understanding of prayer and my motto about prayer became "Always and sometimes."

The part of prayer we emphasize in Seekers as prayer discipline for half an hour a day is the sometimes part. For me, these days, the sometimes part is mostly preparation for growing in the always part. I am trying to become more mindful about all the "little" parts of my life even as my mindfulness is becoming more focused on my theological writing. My mantra these days is less attention to tasks and more attention to relationships so that I can hear the invitations to come out of my cave. Coming out of my cave just for little tasks leaves me lonely.

On the other hand, there are a lot of little tasks in my day. Even as I am moving steadily toward putting down several tasks I am trying to become more mindful of the tasks that are still mine to do. For example, I am pretty intentional these days about being pleasant to the workers in grocery stores and laundries and all the other locations that help me and my household along our way.

I want my spiritual consciousness to be heightened as habit in the midst of all that I do. Mindfulness is the creation of a little spiritual space for monitoring and assessing all my mental and emotional habits that direct me to notice or avoid things going on in myself and in my relationships with other people and the wider world. Mindfulness is about being sensitive to signals and clues in my memories and in my observations. Mindfulness is about being present as a whole person in various situations and circumstances while sustaining enough focus to do the little tasks well. When one is wholly present while doing the little tasks it is a lot

easier to notice additional opportunities for spreading some love around in the midst of role performances. Trish has offered us a great story on this point. She takes time to be present to some homeless people on her regular route to work which has expanded her engagement beyond the nagging question of should I, or should I not, give money to those who ask for it.

Mindfulness is a critical part of freedom from oppression or boredom or alienation. Whatever is already inside you, whatever is coming at you, mindfulness creates the spiritual space and time to choose how one will respond. Having a choice is crucial for the investments that take us from freedom-from to freedom-for. Mindfulness may sometimes help you get to control, when control is the right choice, but it can always get you to constructive engagement. Mindfulness reminds us that finding is not an end in itself but a path to the welcoming of opportunity.

Mindfulness as part of the Christian Way takes you to *alignment* and then *engagement* with the best lures God constantly makes available to us. Somewhere in Seekers there is a recipe, a guideline, a diagram, a metaphor, a slogan, that can be used for any circumstance. Some of them are actually useful if you hold them lightly. Far more important, you can find companions in Seekers for just about any phase of life's journeys. Even more important than that, Seekers is all about creating a community that make time and space to hold onto possibilities for hope and faith and love. We talk about this as "holding each other up to the light." Sometimes I remember and have the energy to send a hand drawn card to Seekers who are in the midst of a tough passage. Mostly I don't for all the reasons I've mentioned earlier in this sermon. But I do contribute to our collective holding of each

other and I am thankful to be held by your caring and concern.

We are fortunate in Seekers to share a gathered prayer life on Sunday mornings that is attuned to what I have been describing. Our prayers are overwhelmingly focused on deepening our personal and shared lives. The current example is holding death up to light, naming death as death. Death and dying is an area I've looked into but prefer to avoid. The current liturgy helps me remember to keep a watchful eye, a hopeful eye, in the spiritual space of death.

It takes personal and community courage to take on death without the softening and deflection that Christians sometimes bring to this territory. We don't say things like, "Death doesn't matter because we will all meet in heaven anyway." Death does matter and our liturgy encourages us to solidarity in claiming and appreciating the life we have been given even as we all head toward death.

Seekers tend to emphasize calling as a path to finding out who you most deeply are. Today I'm focusing on experiencing and expressing who you are in the most everyday and boring tasks. Engaging the little tasks with mindfulness isn't about practicing your calling. It isn't about expressing yourself. It is about being called out. It is about emptying the wastebasket because you want to offer beauty and order for others. This is the path of discovery more than the path of insight. It is about finding your lost sheep, your lost coins, your lost son by letting relationships matter a lot, by offering things into relationships whether they are acknowledged or not. Being called out goes with the path of participation and mindfulness.

How can you find salvation in emptying a wastebasket or washing the dishes, any of the tasks that feel like a burden, any of the task you would rather avoid? Why might you sweep the sidewalk in front of our church on Sunday Mornings? Why might you manage a bulletin board? What alignment do you need to turn a responsibility into a channel of grace for yourself and others? What do you need to engage and not merely consider?

Attend! Attention! Pay, and I mean *pay* attention. Attend in all the places I've suggested. Attend by going to the places that stretch you beyond your comfort zone beyond your current standpoint dependence. Pluck up your courage and look for companions to go to the harder place. Relax into your humility so you can start by just being present when you get to the next place on your path. Humility leads to awareness before you move into a focus of one kind or another.

Part of finding salvation in letting yourself be called out is caring about relationships. Kim gave us a beautiful story last week about finding a transformed grounding for herself during a trip to Haiti because she was denied her typical rut of being a helper. Focusing on being a helper, even though it is about helping others, is still about you, your vision, your calling. Caring can get you to helping and Kim would have learned valuable things from being a helper. Caring plus vulnerability can get you to solidarity, to relationships in which ministry and stewardship flow organically rather than just as a program or project delivered by the helper. We are more likely to end up as friends by proceeding organically but we have to give up our upper hand of just being providers.

Can you find your caring? Can you find your curiosity about what you are enabling for people you don't know, people you can barely imagine. Can you be thankful you have the chance to add a little grace note into Seekers as a Jazz Ensemble? Can you feel that when you do an unnoticed task that you are planting a seed, hidden in the dark earth of our complex relationships, a seed that will happily surprise people someday when the green leaf first begins to show itself.

I am thrilled to have had the opportunity to help enable a transformation in our Sunday School this year. What was feeling like burden and duty to some of our teachers is now being embraced as growth opportunity, as celebrations of new relationships, and as satisfaction in helping our children in Seekers grow in good ways.

I won't live long enough to know most of what we are enabling in Tommy, but I am happy to have helped to open some good opportunities for him at this point in his life path. I am thrilled that all of our teachers this year have taken the time and caring to create a little something that shapes a good class session instead of worrying too much about whether you are doing what you are supposed to do. Lo and behold, think of all the gifts that have come to the community from the children because such opportunities have been created. Celebrate with me the expansion of our Seekers conversations to include more appreciation of our children and their families.

The little task taken on, the little opportunity embraced, the little caring expressed, matter a little bit in themselves.

They matter as well as practice in mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness in all the little tasks, practicing caring as the tasks are done, changes who you are as a whole person in the midst of all the roles you play. Finding meaning becomes more immediate and less of a grand scheme. Instead of salvation as a grand plan, I'm talking about turning coping into loving, turning daily routines into spiritual practices.

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