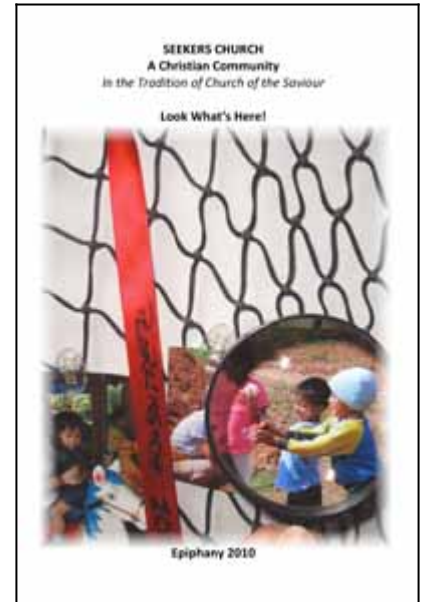


"Saved for Love" by Pat Conover

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Some of you know that I have been writing a book called Progressive Christian Theology. This is my 5th or 6th effort to write this book and I hope I can finish it this time. I would be pleased to have your prayers and encouragement.

Part of my love affair with Seekers is that I have seen the theology I care about flourish within Seekers. A seed was planted before I showed up. The Seekers Call statement uses the phrase "Ground of Being" to refer to God as creator and that is straight out of Paul Tillich, my primary theological mentor. Tillich taught me about dialectic thinking: the idea that several important concepts that seem opposites of each other are instead in dynamic tension. Some permanent

dialectic tensions include concepts such as order and chaos, being and becoming, freedom and destiny. I don't assume that people in Seekers agree with my theological statement. It's the other way round, I see myself as agreeing with what I perceive as dominant theological themes in Seekers liturgy, stories, documents, and conversations. That includes several other theological strands besides Tillich.

There is plenty of existential theology that shows up in our concern for what matters in the midst of life here and now. There is plenty of story theology as carried by Marjory Bankson and others. There is plenty of liberation theology that came with the early emphasis in Seekers on feminism, with our concerns about race in the United States, with our growing comfort with the issues of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexual, Asexual, and Questioning people. I see a significant respect for the deconstruction aspects of postmodern philosophy that shows up in our respect for modern biblical studies, and there is also a respect for science and interest in the growing edges of modern science.

My hope is that my book and this sermon can connect to a number of things that you already believe and understand. I hope when you hear me you will think, "So what is the big deal about that?" So what that we are reframing 20 centuries of Christian theology. It's about time for some Spring cleaning don't you think. But make no mistake, I consider my theological work and the theology of Seekers to be at the very heart and center of orthodox theology because it is all about salvation. When you get confused, just keep asking, "What are we saved from and what are we saved for?"

Today you get an oral effort from me. Maybe what I'm trying to do will be easier in oral form because one of the things I emphasize is the concept of Living Truth, the kind of truth you know by living into it and experiencing it rather than by abstract argument.

I am not presenting a new revelation and I don't claim any special spiritual standing for my writing. I'm just aiming at presenting saving truth, the kerygma of the Bible and of common human experience, in a fresh context, in a fresh envelope of meaning. I present the kerygma in the context of a new metaphysics and a new epistemology. Metaphysics is about what there is to know and epistemology is about how we know it. There are three key interlinked ideas that form the new metaphysics and the new epistemology I present, pretty easy ideas actually.

The first key idea is that our brains have evolved to include the capacity to perceive ideas. This key evolution happened 25,000 to 50,000 years ago, not long at all compared to the four-and-a-half billion years since the formation of our planet, or the two million years since the emergence of our hominid ancestors. Our ability to perceive ideas in-and-of-themselves has allowed us to emerge with collectively created minds, to become human beings and not just homo sapiens. About 4,000 years ago our humanity took a big step with the emergence of written language that supported collective work over time with the ideas embedded in our stories.

Written language makes possible the building of widely shared common stories within enduring envelopes of meaning. The Christian story is embedded in Hebrew scripture and Christian theology was shaped in the context of Greek philosophy to suit a Gentile audience. The new metaphysics I'm writing merely aims at putting the kerygma into a conceptual envelope that reflects some progress over biblical metaphysics and the metaphysics of Aristotle and Plato and Democritus, and others. Biblical metaphysics includes a flat earth understanding of creation with ourselves at the center of existence, a conception that fits with everyday perceptions of the world and with the existential importance to us of our lives and to the search for meaning in life.

Think with me for a moment about the perception of ideas. We

can count the number of people in this room even though none of us have numbers pinned on our backs. We simply apply the the idea of a unit, the basic concept for the construction of arithmetic, to summarize one aspect of our experience of being together. We all can perceive the idea of units and we share collectively developed language to agree on things like how many people there are in this room.

To talk about the ability to perceive ideas includes the understanding that there are ideas, that ideas have their own reality as ideas. This common experience of our minds and shared language gets us past a materialistic metaphysics which dominated the early emergence of modern science as illustrated by the physics of Isaac Newton, by the periodic table of the elements that many of us learned in high school chemistry, etc. Such mechanistic science was built around two of Aristotle's four causes: the material cause and the efficient cause: what things are made of and the energies that cause their movement and combination. In the new metaphysics I add Aristotle's third cause, the formal cause. Form is important for understanding reality and it is our capacity to perceive ideas which allow us to understand and appreciate forms. We can count the people in this room and use the same concepts to count the stones in a big jar in Peter's basement.

The second key idea of the new metaphysics is that everything exists in relationship to other things. There are no independent things that exist all by themselves. We can think analytically and imagine a thing all by itself, but the reality is that every thing is always in relationship to other things. This means that scientific and theological thinking needs to emphasize and include synthetic thinking and not just analytic thinking. This has transformative implications for scientific thinking but, for this sermon, I'm going to try to stay focused on salvation.

We human creatures always exist in relationships. We can think analytically about ourselves as individuals but we are

always in relationships from our first beginnings in the wombs of our mothers. Our minds are collectively shaped by the languages we learn and by our conversations ever after. We can think one at a time, but we think with minds that are collectively shaped and share out thinking in conversations. Because we can perceive ideas each of us can have conversations that share the ideas that focus our perceptions and memories, that help us communicate about the forms we perceive in our relationships. Following this thread, we can think and talk about salvation in the context of the forms of the relationships we share, the ideas that help us understand and appreciate our experience. Each of us can act and initiate and create, but such action arises from, and has meaning for others, based on our collectively created minds and our shared human construction of relationships: including the shared experience of science, art, politics, economics, spiritual practices, and so much more.

The third key to new metaphysics and new epistemology is that thinking synthetically includes thinking about emergence. Mechanistic science would have you think about yourself as a collection of body organs that are made up of cells, that are made up of molecules, that are made up of atoms, that are made up of sub-atomic particles. I just watched a new Teaching Company CD on brain neuroscience. The key referent principle for this course is that the mind is just the brain doing its usual activity. This is analytic, materialistic, and reductionistic thinking. It has great power, but it misses a big truth. Metaphorically speaking, this is thinking with a microscope and not bothering to look through a telescope.

To understand human beings we need to not only understand our body parts and how they fit together but also what we are part of. We do not exist in isolation, never have, never will.

Consider the everyday miracle of digestion for a moment. We eat food. The food may be animal or vegetable. If it is animal, then the food of animals is still vegetables.

Vegetables have their existence and grow by bringing dirt, water, and sunlight into new relationships with each other. You can analyze dirt, water, and sunlight forever and not see the potential to be part of you.

Of course you can't see the potential. A potential is only potential and is invisible to observation. Modern empirical science tests theories against observations and that has made it challenging for modern science to think about potential and emergence but that is happening now. Synthetic thinking in the new metaphysics attends to the emergence of potentials as things change their relationships to each other. We human beings take what vegetables make possible and further rearrange it so that the potential to be part of a whole human creature emerges, including the capacity to perceive ideas.

When we human beings direct our attention to what we are part of we can and do ask what is emerging as we form, and reform, and transform relationships with each other. Sociology and more specific social science disciplines can describe the relationships we form and reason about how we form them. Theology allows us to ask what matters about the relationships we form.

We can talk about what matters because ideas in the brains of human beings are linked to feelings. Contemporary neuroscience has made it clear that the intellectual functions of the cerebral part of our brains are always linked to the limbic system in our brains, the hormonal part of our brains, the feeling part of our brains. An easy example is that we tend to remember the things that are important to us and tend to forget the things that are not important. Important is a word about valuation and valuation includes feelings. Neuroscience can and does analyze neuronal and hormonal activity in the brain but remains numb and blind to the reality that our brains are shaped as minds in relationship to others through conversations. Psychology and sociology and the other human sciences can't escape working with the idea

that human beings work with ideas-as-held though they tend to be agnostic about the reality of ideas-in-and-of-themselves. Among other things, our minds reshape our physical brains by emphasizing some activities over others and sometimes by mobilizing our bodies to take in substances intended to produce an altered state of consciousness.

To think about emergent potential is to think about what is possible, to think about what is not but yet might be. This is where Jesus enters the picture as our savior.

In his time and place in history, Jesus saw some potentials for transformed human relationships that matter a lot. He and his followers and disciples walked their path into the living truth of the Christian Way before it had a name. Paul and the gospel writers give us pictures and stories that testify to the importance of what Jesus started. Despite a lot of limited theology that distorted the original message and modeling of Jesus, the Living Truth was embodied, was incarnated, by the followers of Jesus and it mattered enough to them to create the religion of Christianity.

The book I am writing aims at recovering the emergent truth, the emerging possibilities that Jesus manifested in his words, in his life, in his faith, and in his hope. My testimony is that they matter to me too and I hope they can matter more and more to you. When we deepen our conversations, when we risk more and trust more in our conversations, when we respect each other in our conversations, when we live into the implications of what seems most important in life to us, we take our turn in running a lap on the Christian Way. That is salvation. When we trust God with our lives, the biblical speculation about heaven and the apocalypse fade toward insignificance.

There are many marks of salvation understood as relationships. Here are three.

We get a name. We are recognized by each other as standing

for something. In our Seekers story we are recognized as standing together as a community. Stand by me. We each have something to contribute and we are valued for that. By being a committed and appreciative part of Seekers we contribute by who we are and not just by what we are doing. That gives each of us a name. When we know each other the way we know each other in Seekers, what matters about our relationships is what comes to mind when I say Mary Sue, or Steven, or Debbie. When I say your name it directs my attention to what you mean to me, what matters about you in my relationship with you in the context of Seekers. Salvation is about what matters. Salvation is about savoring each other and caring about other we know less well.

We gain alignment and direction and move away from confusion. We remain within the mystery of being only human creatures, but we gain enough light to guide our next steps along the Christian Way, our Seekers path along the Christian Way. We become aligned with God. We can appreciate God manifest in our relationship, however distorted the mirrors we offer each other. Words like faith and hope and love are no longer empty categories or speculative ideas. Our interest is in living into these words, the ideas these words point to, rather than in trying to define the ideas or speculate about the ideas.

We turn from alienation to engagement and appreciation. With experience and investment and practice we even move to solidarity. Guidelines, ideas like caring and honesty and vulnerability and accountability and love, become deeply held values in our minds and in our relationships. They shape who we are together and are measures of our common salvation. They let us know how much we need each other even in the midst of all our imperfections, even before we are ready, even before we know enough to confess our shortcomings, our sins. Jesus didn't sit on the sidelines waiting for everything to be all right.

The rest of this sermon illustrates a Christian Way of reading

scripture that is resonant within the new metaphysics I have been developing.

Hear first the words of Psalm 71: 1-6 in my paraphrase based on the Revised English Bible.

Psalm 71: 1-6

Holy One, I have found my refuge in you. Please don't let anyone shame me. Use your saving power to rescue me, to deliver me. Hear me! Save me!

Be my rock of refuge, a place where I can come and find you. I believe your promise that I can come to you whenever I want to and discover my deliverance.

Holy One, keep me safe from the power of the wicked. Keep me safe from the pitiless, from the unjust.

I have trusted you from my childhood, and my hope remains in you. I have leaned on you from my birth, from the time that I came out of my mother's womb.

I give thanks for my salvation and praise your steadiness as my savior.

This is a song of anguish, a plea for salvation. What does the author want to be saved from? The author wants to be saved from the oppression of the wicked, the pitiless, the unjust. The author wants more than salvation from pain. Salvation from injustice is wanted and that comes from the author's feelings that the big idea that justice should shape human relationships. The author's hope arises from faith that justice is what God wants and that God will ultimately prevail. Justice is a living truth for this author, a plea arising from experience and not abstract argument about the nature of justice. In the desire for justice, whatever the

next experiences were for this author, lies the possibility of the emergence of more just relationships among people. When we, in turn, hear that plea, we can choose to align ourselves with justice in relationships or turn our head and heart away. The Bible presents one opportunity after another for us to align with, or turn away, from God.

Those who took David's class on Paul's Epistles can testify that I was highly critical of the religion of Paul because I perceive much of it to be not closely aligned with the religion of Jesus. Paul has nothing to say about the life and ministry of Jesus. His sole link to Jesus is his transformative mystical experience on the road to Damascus that turned him around from being an oppressor of Christians to becoming a Christian apostle to the Gentiles. Whatever Paul's limitations, and we noted quite a few, the lectionary scripture for today from the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians is inspired writing that claims the kerygma that Jesus brought forward. Paul offers this love poem as guidance for the Corinthian Church, a here-and-now concern that presents strong guidance for transformed human relationships. Here is my paraphrase.

First Corinthians 13: 1-13

I can speak the usual words we speak. I can speak the words of ecstasy, the language of angels. But if my words do not arise from love they are empty words, the unconnected sounds of a gong or cymbal.

God may have given me the gifts of a prophet and the knowledge of hidden truth, but that is not enough. I may have the faith to move mountains, but that is not enough if my gifts and faith are unconnected to love.

I might give everything I own to the needy. I might give my body to be burned. However, nothing I can give will enrich me if they are less than an expression of love.

Love is patient and kind. Love envies no one, is never boastful, never conceited, never rude. Love is never selfish, never quick to take offense. Love does not keep a list of abuses and mistreatment. Love takes no delight in the sins of others, but rather finds delight in truth.

There is nothing love cannot face. There is no limit to the faith, hope, and endurance that arises from love. Love doesn't run out of energy and stop. Prophecy will stop. Tongues of ecstasy will fall silent. Knowledge will disappear. Our knowledge and our prophecy are partial and they pass away when wholeness comes, when our words are no match for your living truth.

When I was a child I spoke like a child and thought like a child. As I grew up I gained understanding and engaged more deeply with the truth you made available to me. As we are now, we can see only puzzling reflections in a mirror but I believe that one day we shall understand fully. Then my partial knowledge will become whole, like the way God understands me. That wholeness comes with love.

Love endures along with hope and faith, but it is love that provides the deepest guidance.

(paraphrase by Pat Conover based on the REB)

This is a poem about the living truth of love, about love active in human relationships. We are called to transform our engagement of relationships by giving primacy to the guidance to love each other. Ecstasy is good. Reasoned speech is good. Prophecy and wisdom are good. Charity is good. Patience and kindness are good. Hope and faith are good. Love is best.

We can join Paul by growing up into the fullness of loving each other. Turning towards loving more makes more loving possible, encourages the emergence of more loving among us, between us. We can incarnate this living truth. We can

reform and transform our relationships with one another. We can become reoriented in our priorities, in our life choices. We can find our most precious possession not in what we claim for ourselves as if we were individuals undefined by our relationships, but rather in what we share with one another. We can find salvation in what we identify with, what we become part of, rather than in what we can claim and defend as if we are unaccountable individuals.

Let down the drawbridge to your castle. Come out and play and dance in the marketplace, in the school, in the sunlight. Take your lumps and stay focused on what is true and beautiful and just and loving. That will make a lot of good things possible.