



*Gregg Koskela*

In evangelical church circles, we talk a lot about being saved. It's part of our common language and experience. But in exploring salvation more deeply, we realize that we don't all have the same view of what it means to be saved, of what it is that God does. I've found it very helpful to explore other traditions' views of salvation in order to broaden my own experience and to gain a more fully biblical understanding of it. This week I'll share some of my exploration with you.

I've been married to Elaine for 22 years, and we are the parents of Talli (18), Hayley (15) and Aubrey (10).

*BIBLE READING: John 3:16-21*

A famous sitcom had an episode where one of the main characters wanted to convert to Christianity—just because of a girl he wanted to date. The whole episode was fascinating, seeing the writers’ perspective on what it meant to convert. When the character found out there was no way for an “express conversion,” he figured out a way to cheat on the written test about the basics of Christianity. The writers clearly had fun playing out the hypocrisy of cheating to convert, but I found it fascinating that their whole premise revolved around conversion being a matter of learning facts, pure and simple.

Is conversion what we believe? Is it the facts we know? Is it a prayer we pray? Is it how we act? Is it who we are connected to? What role, if any, does community play in salvation?

The gospel, the good news of God, is simple—and complex. Conversion is something we can experience in a moment—and spend a lifetime living into. While I have no desire to make anyone think salvation is too complicated, I have found it helpful in my life to carefully examine what I think about the questions in the previous paragraph and to let the Bible challenge my assumptions about the meaning of salvation.

Friends have some unique perspectives on salvation, and I’m glad to be part of that community!

*SONG: I Know Whom I Have Believed*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Help me understand the fullness of your salvation, Lord Jesus.*

—Gregg Koskela

*BIBLE READING: Romans 12:4-8*

What is the metaphor or picture that comes to mind when you think of being saved? All Christian churches center their understanding of salvation on Jesus, but the heart of the matter is different in each tradition. And I think each has something to offer us.

For those in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the heart of the matter is that the church is Christ's body and it is Christ's body that saves. In other words, being a part of the church is absolutely essential to salvation—because the church *is* the body of Christ.

Imagine a passport. Mine is a tangible reminder that I belong, that I am a citizen of the United States of America. I could become a citizen if I wasn't born here, but it isn't easy and it isn't the norm. My identity as a U.S. citizen comes from the fact that I belong to this group of people.

This is similar to the Orthodox Church's picture of being saved. Christ's work of salvation happens through his body, the church. Faith isn't so much an individual thing but a community thing, something received from the living body of Christ. It's an interesting way to read today's passage from Romans. We tend to be more individualistic, as if the body of Christ doesn't exist until we as individuals are saved and brought into it. We think of what we offer to the whole as an individual part. But what about the things that the whole offers to me? Two thousand years after Christ, literally billions of people have been part of this body; how does my faith come from this body of Christ, these people who came before me?

*SONG: We're the People of God*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, how are the people in your body helpful to my salvation?*

—Gregg Koskela

*BIBLE READING: Ephesians 2:4-10*

The heart of the matter for Roman Catholics is that Christ's body and blood are literally present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Partaking in the Eucharist—which has been consecrated by a priest under a bishop who is in community with all Roman Catholic bishops around the world—is what brings salvation. Jesus, physically present, saves. Before we as Friends tear apart the ways that this act may have been misused, we ought to take the time to understand the best part of this perspective.

For me, perhaps the most beautiful and effective piece of this view of salvation is its reminder that not I but *Christ* saves. I can only receive the Eucharist. I cannot make it, earn it, do it; I can only receive. I must face my complete dependence, and it is a dependence that is inextricably intertwined with community and Christ. For all the criticism that the Roman Catholic church has received about being works-driven, the heart of their theology—their best theology—expresses the gift of God's grace more deeply than most Protestants practice. It's a living, breathing example of Ephesians 2.

How might we understand our salvation as something received, something given? How might we wrap our brains more tightly around the grace that salvation truly is?

*SONG: Wonderful Grace of Jesus*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift that only God can bring through Jesus Christ!*

—Gregg Koskela

*BIBLE READING: Romans 10:9*

What metaphor works for the common evangelical understanding of salvation? The one I will share may be a tad uncomfortable, but I share it in the hopes that it causes us to examine what we believe about being saved in light of what the Bible teaches.

Perhaps salvation is like this: Perhaps God is making a future all-star football team. Not one of us is good enough on our own. But God sent Tom Brady to show the way, to do things on a football field that we cannot do ourselves. If you believe in your heart that Tom Brady did things for you on a football field that you cannot do, you can wear his number 12 jersey!

The metaphor in some churches is like this: When God looks at you, if you have believed, he sees the jersey and you're on the team. Never mind that if I actually went on an NFL football field, I would be knocked unconscious if not permanently maimed by the first hit I took! It's not about what I do, and it's not about now. It's all about a future team that God is recruiting, and I just need to believe and to have God see not me but only that jersey.

This way of looking at salvation does have a positive aspect that the others lack—a strong element of my individual choice to believe and follow. However, no actual change happens to me. Salvation is a covering over of who I am, giving me admittance to a future team.

But what if God actually wants to transform us? What if, instead of just a surface change, God wants to bring deep heart change to us?

*SONG: Since Jesus Came Into My Heart*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, show me the deep change you want to bring in me.*

—Gregg Koskela

*BIBLE READING: Ephesians 4:4-16*

In the church my family attended when I was a child, every service had an opportunity to pray the sinner's prayer and be saved. Much later in life, my dad told me it was one of the reasons he left the church—all churches—for several decades. Was there anything more to the Christian life after you prayed the prayer? It didn't seem like it when the same thing was the focus week after week after week.

For some, the general idea of church goes like this: church is where I bring my friends who don't know Jesus so they can hear a "professional" tell them about Jesus and the way to be saved. This perspective has some unintended consequences. With this view, I'm already done—I'm in, I'm saved, I've done all there is to do. The only reason to keep gathering as a church is so that other people can come to know Jesus. And that's done best by the people up front—the professionals who know what they are doing—not me.

How much this falls short of the beauty of Scripture! Today's passage is full of vivid, active pictures for how we as Christians were made to help each other do the works of service God has prepared in advance for us to do. We're in this together! We are saved in order to *participate* in the body of Christ! That means actively joining the body of Christ at work in the world much more than just "finding a job in the church." Salvation is deep, and wide, and full, and rich!

*SONG: We Are the Family of God*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, I want to live with a rich view of salvation! Help me.*

—Gregg Koskela

*BIBLE READING: Mark 4:1-20*

I think God truly wants to transform our lives. This is salvation. The picture that the Bible often uses, the one that Friends and some others have grabbed onto, is an organic picture. Salvation is like a seed taking root and growing, bringing new life to a barren field. This isn't a made-up metaphor—it comes from Jesus himself in today's passage.

Salvation as a seed brings some important things together. It's centered on Christ's work and God's gift. Christ's death brings forgiveness, allowing our ground to be receptive to God's work. Before, there was a sort of plastic cover over our ground, a barrier of our own making in our sin and disobedience. Christ's resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit gives power for the seed to be present in each person's life and for the scattering of God's seed around the world.

The parable Jesus tells brings together two differing perspectives. Like the Orthodox and Roman Catholic emphasis on community and receiving, we can do nothing to make a seed grow—it's the gift of the sower. But like the Protestant emphasis on choice, our choices in life influence the kind of soil that we are.

Some communities and churches help create and spread more seeds than others. Think of all the saplings that sprout up beneath a strong maple tree. Church communities can make it easier or harder for seeds to sprout.

I think our goal is much more than just having a passport, partaking in the Eucharist, or putting on a jersey; it is for Christ's seed to grow in us and change us.

*SONG: Seed, Scattered and Sown*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, I want your seed to grow in me. Help me participate in your body so that we help others grow in you too.*

—Gregg Koskela

*BIBLE READING: Philippians 1:3-6*

Imagine a clear glass full of water. Imagine adding a drop or two of bright red food coloring, noticing the way those small drops inevitably permeate every molecule of water so it will never be clear again. I've heard people use this example to describe how sin—any sin, even one tiny sin—taints us completely. But I want to turn that metaphor on its head.

For all of our Protestant emphasis on grace rather than works, we sure have put a lot of rules, expectations, lists, and effort into our spirituality. As we strive for holiness and right living, we often seem to slip into a pattern of *our* effort, *our* work at eradicating the bad habits and sins in our lives.

I want to close this week with an absolute celebration of the central good news of God! Christ forgives us; Christ saves us! And it is a deep, beautiful, miraculous work that transforms us to the core. Allowing the seed of Christ into my life, accepting what God has done for me—this sets in motion something which cannot be stopped, which can only be received. It brings the inevitable transformation of *us* into who we were created to be!

“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Our choice to say yes to Jesus is like the food coloring being dropped into our glass. It may take awhile and it may be slow, but God will be faithful to permeate every pore of our bodies, minds, and souls with the presence of Christ. The fruit of the Holy Spirit will grow in us. We will be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, and we will find our place of participation in Christ's body. This is the fullness of salvation! Thanks be to God.

*SONG: Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Holy Spirit, permeate me!*

—Gregg Koskela