

Is Christ a Scapegoat?

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church

Sunday, October 22, 2006; Bryn Mawr, PA

Hebrews 5:1-10

“Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ...”

Movement 1 – We Want to Be Hugged

Everybody needs to hear an encouraging word. Everybody wants to hear at one time or another that they are “o.k.” We need encouragement, we need positive affirmation, and we need to be hugged. A pastor, and a good friend of mine, Dr. Rodney Kennedy, argues in his book, *The Encouraging Parent* that good parenting is not necessarily about disciplining a child (while that is necessary and important), but the focus should be about encouraging the child. Parents, when your child runs to you with a picture of obscure colors, odd shapes, and no compositional structure whatsoever, that child is looking for encouragement. Say some good things about the picture, put the picture on the refrigerator door, and let the child know that you are proud of the work that he or she did. When your child runs to you and shows you a trick that may seem small and insignificant to you, remember that the child is looking for encouragement. Take the time to notice your child and say an encouraging word. We need to encourage our children, we need to speak good words to our children, hug them, tell them they are special, and that they are loved. We need to speak and show encouragement to our children.

But it is not just children that need to be encouraged. We all need to hear an encouraging word. We need to hear that we are special, that we are important and that we are loved. In the very beginning of the movie *Saving Private Ryan* we find an elderly gentleman in a cemetery in Normandy, falling before a grave and asking again and again “was I worth it, was I worth it.” As we find out later, a number of brave soldiers died to save his life, and he strived to live a life worth living that would have honored their sacrifice. We are given the impression that he lived his whole life trying to make the sacrifice worth it. He fell before the tombstone of his fallen comrades looking for a sign of affirmation, a sign of encouragement for the whole and entire life he lived.

We all need to hear an encouraging word from time to time. We want to hear that we have lived a life worth living. We need to know that we are loved. We want to hear that we are special, and we all, at one time or another, look to be hugged. Especially when we fall, we need to hear encouragement. We may fall physically or spiritually, and we look up for someone saying to us that we are still ok. When we fall short of God’s glory, when we fall into sin, we look for someone to tell us that we are still loved and we are still special. When we find ourselves surrounded by anger, mired in jealousy, steeped in criticism, sinking in despair, we look up for some kind of word of encouragement. We look up for someone to tell us that we are still ok, that we are still worthwhile and that we are still loved. We look up for someone to mutter that encouraging word, because we know that we have screwed up and we want to know that everything will be ok. We know that we have not lived the way we should be living, we know that we have not shown the grace that we have to show, and we need to hear that we are still loved and that it will be ok. We want to know that despite ourselves, we are still special people in the eyes of the Lord. We need to find that “home on the range” where only an encouraging word is spoken and where we are hugged and told that we are still ok. No matter who you are, no matter where you are, we all need to hear an encouraging word.

Movement 2 - The Proxy Hug

Where do we go for assurance? Where do we go for that hope and that word of encouragement? We can look to others in our lives, but ultimately we want to go to God. Just like a child looks to his or her parents, we look to our own divine parent, our creator for the words of encouragement. We look to God for some kind of hope and some kind of sign telling us that we are indeed good enough despite our sins and our shortcomings. Our human history, our Christian history is one of looking for approval and love from God. When Jerusalem was in its glory, when the temple was standing tall for all the people to see, a high priest would be the one who would offer encouragement by God to all the people. The high priest would speak on God's behalf and tell the people that they are loved, that they are forgiven and that they are special in the eyes of God. We are given a proxy hug from God, we are given God's encouragement second hand through the high priest. When we turn to the scriptures, we are in essence turning to something that will share the love of God with us, second hand. When we look to a minister, priest, or anyone in the clergy class, we are looking for someone to tell us that we are ok on God's behalf. We are given the encouraging word second hand. We are told via the grapevine, we are shared the good news through a secondary source, we are reminded that God's loves us by one of God's messengers. The theologian, Paul Tillich, claims that all of history contains moments and points when God is reviled through others, second hand. Through the prophets, through the kings, through Moses and Abraham and Isaac God is reviled and a word of hope and encouragement is shared second hand.

This was the practice in Israel for the Jews. This was the expected way to connect and communicate with God. If someone did hear a direct word from God, then that person was made a priest or a prophet and spoke on God's behalf for the rest of the people. The majority still heard the word second hand and connected to God through a handful of individuals.

Even today, we set people apart to tell us what God has to say. We tend to place our clergy high; we tend to set our clergy apart and expect to hear from them a word of encouragement, a word of hope, and a word from God. When tragedy strikes, news reporters turn to the clergy for a word from God. When tragedy strikes, individuals turn to the clergy for a word from God. When people are in the mud and the sludge of sin and despair, they tend to turn to clergy for that word from God. I remember someone who came into my office once who was struggling with many personal demons and looked at me welling up with tears, asking "you need to tell me what God has to say to me, because I can't ask God myself." So often we look for that proxy, that second hand account of God's hope and God's grace. We are look to receive that word of assurance second hand.

Movement 3 – The Faults of Human Assurance

Yet how much assurance can one person offer? When you are asking questions of salvation, questions of forgiveness and questions of grace, these are questions of the divine. How much assurance can a human, finite person offer? Because our proxy is also human. Our mediator also needs mediation, also needs to hear an encouraging word, also needs to hear hope. The scripture reminds us that the high priest of the temple was human, was prone to fail. The good news is that the high priest can relate to all of our struggles and concerns. The bad news is that the high priest also needs to ask God for help and forgiveness. The messenger is only human, and can only do so much. The messenger can only go so far and can sometimes get it wrong. Think of our congress. We elect individuals to speak on our behalf in Washington DC. We expect them to represent us, to speak for us, and to represent the larger political body to us.

Yet how many times has scandals mired our view of the politicians? How many times has the human nature of the individual disappointed our hopes for the office? How many times have we elected someone new with the hope that things will be better only to find another scandal and another disappointment. Or think of the clergy who are to speak on our behalf and to us for God. How many times have we been reminded that the clergy are only human? How many times have scandal and faults brought down our hope to hear that encouraging word? I'm going to be honest with you; most clergy are at best one day ahead of everyone else... at best. It is like learning piano from a teacher who is always one lesson ahead of the student, the teacher's knowledge is limited and can only offer so much (my thanks to a *Simpson's* episode for the idea).

I have met more than one person who lost all trust of all clergy because of an oversight, or a scandal, a sin, or a moment of falling short. The sad thing is that most often, the person has left church life altogether and becomes isolated from God.

Maybe it was because of the human nature of the priest that the Jews had a ritual of atonement every year. Maybe it was because they knew that the mediator, the messenger, the priest was only human that they had to return to the temple each year, express their contrition, and hope and hear for an encouraging word from God. Anthropologists like Frazer, Elide and others suggests that all cultures find some kind of scapegoat to insure that encouraging word. The scapegoat would symbolically carry the sins of the people and ensure another year of hope. For the Jews, it was an actual goat that was sent into the wilderness, and the priest would promise that God would be with the people for at least one more year. The people and the priest needed something that would carry the sins of the people for the sake of forgiveness and hope. And year after year that hope was offered and assured. Yet that assurance was temporary, that assurance was short and it was offered through someone who needed it just as much as the rest of the people. How much assurance can one person offer?

Movement 4 – The Blessed Assurance of Christ

We need to turn to Christ for that blessed, eternal assurance. We look to Christ for that word from God that comes directly from God. We look to Christ to break out of the cycle and to find the eternal hope we so desperately need. We turn to Christ for that blessed assurance. The author of Hebrews sets up the role that Christ fills. He reminds us of the job description. The high priest, the person who gives us an encouraging word deals gently with the lowest of society because he is also subject to weakness (he is human), he does not take honor, but is called by God, and he is part of a line of priests called by God. These have been the requirements of the high priest, of the one who offers gifts and sacrifices on our behalf for centuries. But as the scholar, Timothy Long, reminds us, Christ not only meets those requirements, but exceeds them. Christ exceeds them through his function – his actions are eternal. Christ exceeds them through his person, that he is not only fully human but is also fully God. Finally, Christ exceeds them through his appointment, that Christ is called and appointed by God. Christ is overqualified for the position. Yet when Christ is the High Priest, the role of high priest becomes eternal. Christ offers us eternal assurance, Christ offers us eternal salvation, and Christ offers us the word of God from God in the most direct and most intimate way. It is what happens when you are looking for a ditch-digger and you hire a landscaper or when you are looking for someone to mop the floor and you hire a four star chief. The person can do the job and much, much more. Christ can be the high priest we need, Christ can be the minister we need, Christ can be the clergy we need and much, much more. Instead of just carrying a message, Christ becomes the message, Christ is the word of encouragement, Christ is the salvation. We look to Christ, to the

holy Son of God for that assurance, for that hope and for that grace we can only fully find and experience from God.

Movement 5 – Obedient Suffering

This assurance is found not just in who Christ is, but in how Christ lives; it is found in the fullness of Christ's suffering. Remember, the role of the priest is to offer the sacrifice and the gifts, but not to be the sacrifice. The role of the priest is not to suffer but to offer something on behalf of the people. But Christ suffered; Christ was sacrificed and became the priest and the sacrifice at once. Yet he didn't suffer because God demanded that he be punished. No, Christ suffered because he was obedient to God's call of love, of redemption and of forgiveness to the people in the here and now. Think of the parent who cares for a sick child. The parent will suffer late nights, the parent will suffer lifestyle changes, and the parent will suffer demands that are not a part of normal circumstances. Yet the parent suffers because he or she is obedient to that divine and holy love that comes from God. The suffering is not inflicted by God, but is a suffering that comes out of a profound obedience to love from God. Think of the spouse who takes care of his or her partner who is struggling with an illness. There will be suffering but not because God makes it happen. No, it is because of obedience to the divine love and will of God. It is a divine and holy suffering. This is what Christ shows to us. Christ came and loved us, forgave us, included us, and was rejected by the world.

They mocked him and he still offered a hand of forgiveness.

They hated him and he still offered a word of love.

They spat at him and he still offered actions of compassion.

They rejected him and he still looked for their salvation.

Christ lived the way of God, Christ stayed obedient to the ideas of God, to the life God intended us all to live, and through his obedience he suffered, he was crucified and died. He stayed true to the way of God even though it wasn't the way of the world.

Now we must wonder, was Christ our scapegoat? Was Christ, in that moment of his death, our punishment and our payment for our sins? Was Christ the payment for a debt that we have accrued? This is one way of thinking, that Christ offers us not only the way to live and the encouragement that we are loved, but also the assurance that our justification is assured. Christ offers us the assurance that we can live a life of forgiveness because the punishment we have earned has been paid by Christ. This is one way to consider and to understand the event on the Cross. Yet I will also challenge you to look at the cross in another way. One of my seminary professors, S. Mark Heim, suggests that we look at the resurrection as well as the cross and consider what it is that Christ is challenging. Heim agrees that a common way to understand the cross is to see it as a payment for our sins. That on the cross Christ becomes the priest and the sacrifice in one. That is one way to consider what Christ did. We can look at the assurance of the way Christ lived and the way Christ died. We can look for assurance in who Christ is, but also look for what Christ did. Think of Gandhi and the non-violence movement. People in India could just hold up Gandhi as a liberator of India. That is what Gandhi did. Yet people like Martin Luther King Jr. and others looked at how Gandhi did it. They were inspired by the method of peace and resistance. In the same way we need to look at how Christ lived and find the assurance in the way Christ lived.

Movement 6 – Salvation in the Resurrection

I contend that our assurance is also made real in the resurrection. Remember that God is bigger than we are, and the event on the cross can be experienced and lived in more than one way. The cross can offer us salvation in a variety of ways cutting into the many layers of our own life. For salvation is not only found in the crucifixion but in the resurrection. Salvation is found not only in the way that Christ suffered, but also in the victory that Christ celebrated. Through Christ we are saved for the glory that is to be, and we are saved to live the glory that is today. That salvation is found not only in the obedient love that Christ lived, but in the actions of God all through the event on the cross. Just as a parent does not leave the side of a hurting child, God did not leave the side of Christ. Maybe God was counting the debts paid, but maybe at the same time, God was with the suffering high priest, the one called by God, in the old order of Melchizedek; the one who offers our assurance of our salvation in the most perfect way. The one who was obedient in that most holy way and the one who suffered because of his obedience. Maybe God stayed by Christ's side through to his death, and in a great and eternal act of mercy and grace, God made Christ's suffering redemption through his resurrection. And we are given hope. Maybe in the resurrection, God took the suffering that we cause, God took the sins that we commit against his holy and perfect Word and buried them in the grave, and gave Christ to life. Our failings and despair has been buried and we can no live!

My brothers and sisters, in making Christ the high priest, God made the ritual of forgiveness eternal and sacred.

In making Christ the high priest, God made the holy Word a part of all of our lives.

In the suffering of Christ, God made holy the obedient and graceful suffering of us all.

In the suffering of Christ God lifted up the cycles of sin, the cycles of violence, the cycles of destruction that we all exist, participate in, and live in, and is a part of who we are as a people.

In the death of Christ, God brought our sinful nature to its end.

In the death of Christ, God showed where suffering and despair may lead.

Yet in the resurrection of Christ, God broke the cycle of violence. God stopped the scapegoat, and said "no" to the need of sacrifice. We no longer need offer anything to God but our lives. We no longer need to wonder if we are forgiven. We no longer need to look to any man or any woman for assurance, but only to Christ our Lord for that blessed assurance. We are now free to walk with Christ. We are now free to be with Christ. We are now free to follow Christ wherever he leads and wherever he goes.

We may suffer, but when the suffering is suffering out of obedience, then it is a suffering which will be holy. I know some people who will leave with the first sign of hardship. I know some people who will walk with a half-covenant to the Lord, waiting for the hardships to fall. And when the first leaf of trouble hits the ground, they wonder and they doubt and they leave the path of the Lord. But I shall not be moved. I shall not be moved even if the winds of the world blow against me because I am walking with the Lord. There are those who call us to slow down and fit in with the world, to not cause so much of a stir, and not walk so zealously next to Christ. But I shall not be moved even if the currents of culture threaten to push me over, because I am walking with the Lord. I shall not be moved even if the weights and the demands of the world come crashing down on me because I am walking with the Lord. For I have been to the cross, and I have seen the suffering like no other has seen. I have seen the tears of Christ fall, I have seen the blood of Christ flow, and I have seen the empty grave that redeems that suffering; I shall not be moved. We have been called, we have been blessed, we have been assured that no matter what we face, no matter what we endure, we will continue to walk with our Lord, and that is salvation that no man or no woman can offer. That is salvation from Christ our Lord. Glory,

glory halleluiah we cannot be moved from the foundation of Christ our Lord. Glory, glory
halleluiah, we shall not be moved. For we are walking with Christ our Lord.
AMEN