

I

This past spring, I had the honor and privilege of coaching a team of 9-, 10-, and 11-year-old boys in Little League baseball.

About midway through the season, our team was at bat, and I was in the dugout watching our hitter at the plate, when I heard a discussion start between two of the boys, that quickly turned into an argument.

“I’m Jewish,” one boy announced loudly and proudly.

“What’s Jewish?” said his young teammate, genuinely quizzical about the concept.

“We don’t believe that Jesus was the Messiah,” came the answer.

“What?! That’s crazy!”

At that point, I intervened and instructed the boys to focus on the game and to encourage their teammate at the plate and save the intricacies of interfaith dialogue for after the game.

II

Here in Georgia, you and I live in the so-called Bible belt. Our community is full of churches of every tradition, size, and description.

But even here in the Bible belt, we’re not isolated from the changes unfolding all around us. As the world grows more interconnected, our community, our state, and our nation are all growing more diverse in every way, and that diversity extends to matters of faith. When our church was founded as one of the very first organized congregations in our city two centuries ago, our forebears couldn’t have imagined that in 2021, you and I would live within easy

reach of not just dozens of churches, but also of synagogues and mosques and temples and meditation centers. And across the nation today, the fastest growing religious group in America is the “nones,” those who claim no religious affiliation whatsoever.

A handful of our brothers and sisters in Christ bemoan these changes and they argue stridently that the Christian faith should be privileged in the public square. But most Christians that I know, while very aware of the changes unfolding all around us, have taken the position that matters of faith are best discussed in homes and in houses of worship, but faith is not an appropriate subject for public debate.

And those two cultural realities – the growing religious diversity in our world, and our general reticence to talk frankly about matters of faith in the public square, make stories like the one we’re about to hear today seem very strange to our ears.

Is Christianity the one true religion? What are our obligations, if any, toward our neighbors who practice a different faith, or no faith at all? Those are the kinds of questions that we encounter in today’s reading from the Book of Acts.

III

This spring and summer, we’re reading and preaching our way through the Book of Acts. Last week, we read the story about the time when Peter and John were going up to the Temple in Jerusalem when they were approached by a man who had been unable to walk since birth.

People would carry him to the entrance to the Temple and lay him there, and he would ask passersby for spare

change. When Peter and John saw him, they told him they had no silver or gold to give, but they did have the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and they took him by the hand and raised him up, and immediately, his feet and ankles were made strong, and this man who had never walked in his life jumped up and began to walk.

It's important to note that this healing didn't happen out in Galilee, out in the country, out in some no-name place. No, this healing happened in the Temple, in Jerusalem – in the very same place where Jesus had taken on the Pharisees and argued with the Sadducees, the very same place where Jesus had turned over the tables of the money changers and scolded them for turning his Father's house into a den of robbers. In short, Peter and John had invoked the name of Jesus right there in the living room of some of the very people who had just gone to great trouble to be rid of Jesus.

And what happened next is our story for today. So I invite you to listen now for a Word from God from Acts 4:1-22.

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-

priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is

'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;

it has become the cornerstone.'

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. They said, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen

to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

IV

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.

This is one of those trouble verses in Scripture – one of those verses that has often been used as a proof-text and as a justification for some very dark things in history.

And it still is a trouble verse today.

Does this verse mean that my dear friend and clergy colleague who happens to be a rabbi is not saved? What about the family who lives on my street, who are the sweetest, kindest people, with the cutest kids you ever did see, who don't appear to practice any kind of faith at all? Are they not saved?

What about the people who you know and love who practice a different faith, or no faith? What is our obligation toward these people who stand outside the Christian faith? Should we try to save them? Is that even possible?

I think where we often get tripped up in conversations like these is around the word, “saved.” Somewhere along the way, we developed overly simplistic idea that

“being saved” or “getting saved” is some kind of divine fire insurance. If you “get saved” then you’ve secured a non-smoking seat in the afterlife, but if you don’t “get saved” before you die, then woe be unto you, so you better “get saved” right now, because tomorrow isn’t guaranteed to any one of us.

That’s obviously an exaggerated treatment of a particular theology of salvation that is dominant here in the Bible belt, and indeed, across large swaths of the global church.

But the word “saved,” as used here in Acts means “healed, made whole, restored.” The man born lame from birth had been healed, made whole, restored, that is, saved, not because he said a certain prayer or gave intellectual assent to a set of theological propositions or worked hard enough at “being a good guy.” His salvation, like your salvation, like my salvation, is a free gift of God’s amazing grace made known in Jesus of Nazareth.

So what about my rabbi friend and my neighbors? What about the people you know and love?

My friend, it is not our job to save them, as if you or I had that kind of power to begin with. If you and I had the power to grant salvation to ourselves or to anyone else, then the whole exercise of the cross and the empty tomb was foolishness. It is God who does the saving.

My job, and your job, is to respond to God’s grace made known to us in Jesus Christ with joyful thanksgiving, and to love and serve our neighbors with the self-emptying love Jesus models for us – the neighbors who look like us and pray like us, and the ones who don’t look like us and who

don't pray like us, and the ones who don't pray at all. It's my job and your job to love them, and when the opportunity presents itself, to listen to the Holy Spirit as you share with them about what we have seen and heard in Jesus of Nazareth.

V

When I was a boy, the congregation in which we worshiped sang the same closing hymn every Sunday. And the refrain went like this. They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

As we think about our life together here at First Presbyterian Church, as we think about what it means to be followers of Jesus in an incredibly diverse and interconnected and complex world, I'm convinced that the world out there won't know we are Christians by the soundness of our doctrinal statements. They won't know we are Christians by the bumper stickers on our cars or the jewelry we wear. They won't know we are Christians by the beauty of this building.

They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

The 2001 terrorist attacks didn't just destroy office towers. Thousands of apartment homes were also destroyed or heavily damaged in Lower Manhattan. In the weeks after the attacks, thousands of workers with backgrounds in construction and debris removal came to New York from across the country to help with the cleanup.

But a church in South Carolina learned that most of the early focus on the cleanup was on the commercial real estate, but there was a need for volunteers to clean apartments, many of which were full of glass, dust, paper and all kinds of unimaginable debris.

So the church got a group together and drove from South Carolina to New York. Each day, they would walk from the place where they stayed to the attack site, and New Yorkers had taken to lining the streets each morning to thank the workers who were coming to clean up.

As the church group was walking to the site one day, a local came alongside and began to ask questions. "Where are you from?" he said. "South Carolina," answered a woman with the group. "Are you all engineers?" he said. "Oh, no. We're just here to clean up some apartments."

"Wait," he said. "You mean to tell me that you came all the way from South Carolina to clean the apartments of people you don't know, for free?"

"Yes," said the woman.

"Why would you do something like that?" he said.

"Because we're Christians, and that's what we do."¹

And maybe, just maybe, right there in the middle of all that chaos and debris and heartache, somebody got saved in Jesus' name.

¹ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (John Wiley & Sons: San Francisco, 2003), 37.