Sunday, June 6, 1982
A PERSISTENT HERESY
John 3:16-17; Romans 3:21-25; Galatians 3:11-14

Not long ago, one of our church members told me about a conversation he had with a person where he works. In the conversation, the individual said that she read the Bible each day for one hour and that this was a necessary activity in order for a person to be saved, that is to gain life after death in heaven, in other words to earn God's favor.

This illustrates again one of the most persistent Christian heresies, sometimes known as "works righteousness," the belief that we need to earn God's love or God's favor by performing certain religious duties.

Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't read the Bible each day. But I am saying that reading the Bible does not cause God to love us more than someone who doesn't. It may make the reader more aware of God's love and more sensitive to it.

The belief that, somehow, we have to earn God's love has been a persistent heresy throughout the history of the Christian church. Another way to state the heresy is that God loves some people more than others because they are more religious than the rest of us. It is the heresy of self-righteousness. Read the letters to the editor in the daily newspapers and you can find many examples of this heresy.

This persistent heresy sprang up almost as soon as the church began to be more organized in the first century A.D. It has also been present in the Jewish religion in the time of Jesus and before. Jesus had an almost constant battle with the Pharisees, Scribes, and other religious people of his time over this heresy. St. Paul had to combat it in many of the new congregations. It's what the letter to the Galatians in the New Testament is about.

The main religious question then was the same as now — how can individuals who are by nature sinful, imperfect, win the favor or love of God who is Holy? Paul's answer was a simple one, they cannot! One cannot earn God's favor or love or salvation by performing certain religious duties. This is what makes the letter to the Galatians such a revolutionary document. It's what made Jesus a revolutionary in his time. People were worshipping a God whom they had made in their own image — a monarch, a judge, a God who kept track of every little infraction of the rules.

As an Apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul proclaimed that we are free from these misconceptions. We do not have to work to appease an angry or jealous God. Yet there were individuals at work in the congregation at Galatia, who said Paul was all wrong. They said that the people had to earn God's love by fulfilling certain religious rules and laws. They were saying that one could not even become a member of the church until certain requirements of the law had been fulfilled.

It caused Paul to write to them, "O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you... it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law for he or she who through faith is righteous shall live."

Paul wrote the same message to the church at Rome, — "For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by God's grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ."

But the heresy would not die out. Martin Luther in the 16th century had to combat the same heresy and his doing so contributed to the Protestant Reformation. In Luther's time a large part of the Christian Cl1urch believed and taught that one could only gain salvation through per-forming certain works. The grace and love of God were almost forgotten.

It's not too difficult to understand why this heresy has been and still is so persistent. If you believe that by performing certain religious duties you can gain God's love and favor, then you can make yourself better than otl1ers. In a parable Jesus told, the Pharisee therefore prayed, "God, I tl1ank you that I am not like other people. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get."

The same heresy has been used by the church in order to gain power. If one can gain God's favor through performing certain religious duties, and if the church is an institution which defines those duties and requirements, then the church has a monopoly on Salvation. And this is exactly what had happened in Luther's time. An individual had no direct access to God but could obtain God's favor and eternal life only through the rules and requirements of the church.

But if individuals have direct access to God as Jesus taught and if God loves and accepts all people no matter who they are, or what church they attend, or that kinds of sins they have committed, then that's a revolutionary doctrine. Then all of us are equal in God's eyes because God loves us all equally. So, the person in prison is loved by God as much as the most respected citizen in town. If you accept this, then there can be no self-righteousness.

Then too, the church is in reality a different kind of institution. It no longer exists as the business with a monopoly on salvation or a monopoly on God, rather the church is a community of people who have accepted God's love and forgiveness and want to share that love and joy with others. The church becomes inclusive rather than exclusive.

And that's exactly what Jesus taught and lived and died for. And his resurrection attests to God's ultimate love for all of us and for the world. And nothing can kill that love. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Jesus revealed a unique concept of God which people like the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther and countless others have tried to recover from the persistent heresy.

Jesus Christ was God's love focused in a human being and thus he showed us that God is more than just an object of worship, but God is also a presence dwelling in each one of us. God is also a force surrounding us, a loving power that permeates creation. It's just the opposite of such references to God as "the man upstairs," or parents saying to their children, "You had better be good or God will punish you." Or unthinking friends will often try to comfort someone in bereavement by saying, "God has taken your dear one home."

Jesus revealed a God who makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. There is no place where God is not. God is not selective. God does not bring trouble into some people's lives and not into others. God is there where anyone opens his or her mind to God. And even if the mind is closed, God is there anyway.

At the root of Jesus'concept of God is an awareness of oneness, or a spiritual unity with God and with all of creation.

Thus, you do not have to do anything to earn God's favor or God's love or God's acceptance. You already have that. You only have to accept it and be open to it. You are beloved of God simply because you exist. You can be described as the activity of God living itself out into expression as you. God loves you because God is love and thus love is your true nature also. Meister Eckhart put it bluntly when he said that he never thanked God for loving him, because God cannot help it because it is God's nature to love.

All of this is what we call God's grace. Grace is a way of defining the activity of God's love which works for us and in us constantly. God's grace toward us is not dependent upon any special faith or prayer or works on our part.

Grace comes to all; by the grace of God, no matter how much you feel you have done wrong, you are still loved and forgiven by God. God's grace is not something you have to work for. You can't stop it or start it. It simply is. It's an explanation of why things are. never quite hopeless.

Thus, in the New Testament and in the Christian faith, the word salvation means health, wholeness, being in harmony with those around us and with all of creation and with God. It means allowing God to be a bigger part of your life. It means opening yourself to the love and goodness of God.

It also means that God accepts us as we are, and then because we accept the fact that God accepts us, God changes us, heals us, makes us into new persons.

When we experience God's grace, it means simply that we accept the fact that God accepts us. There is nothing we can do to earn God's love for us. It is there before we ask.

So, you don't have to wait until your life is completely straightened out before you can experience God's love and power. You don't have to worry about making something of yourself, or about being something special. This can make a big difference in how you live your life and do your job.

One time I heard a speech by a personnel manager of a large national firm. He said the first thing he tried to determine about a new employee was whether that individual was intent on "being something," or "doing something." Elaborating on this distinction, he said, "The individual who is intent on being something is a person who does not have his or her ego needs met in a healthy way. Such employees are forever attempting to use the job in order to enhance themselves. These are people who are never able to risk anything or act courageously. All of their moves tend to be manipulative. When they come up to a given problem, they always perceive it on two levels. On the surface they are asking, "What needs to be done here?" But on a deeper level, they are asking, "How can I use this situation to get ahead myself?" These people have flawed vision, and very frankly, the higher they get in the decision-making process, the more of a liability they become.

On the other hand, the individual who wants to do something is a person who has his or her ego needs met in a healthy fashion. In a sense, individuals like these have themselves off their hands, so they are able to come to a problem situation and ask the single question, "What needs to be done here?" These individuals are able to sacrifice. They are able to take risks. They are able to make the hard decisions. And though they are rare indeed, the quicker I can

identify them and move them up in the decision-making hierarchy, the better it is for the business in the years to come.

That's an important distinction, and I would suggest that those individuals who have simply accepted the fact that God loves and accepts them and that they need not earn God's favor because it is freely given, are the kind of people who are secure enough then in their own self-esteem to be able to take risks and to make the hard decisions. They do not have to worry all the time about how to enhance themselves.

Sam Keen tells how he had always felt that if he could just get a doctorate from an Ivy League school and become a professor, then that sense of "nobodiness" that had been with him from the beginning would go away. But he accomplished all these goals only to find the same haunting emptiness within. One night alone in a hotel room, sophisticated modern man that he was, he found himself asking that same old question, "What must I do to be saved?" And then he said, the answer began to jump up and down before mis eyes as if it were written on the wall. It was simply, "nothing, nothing at all." "IT COMES with the territory, or it does not come at all." After that experience, he says, in looking back over his life, he realized that he had been like a man riding an ox, looking for an ox.

When we experience God's grace, we learn that things do not have to be perfect to be good. We also learn that every gift we have been given would make a good present for someone else and that giving out of the fullness tl1at is already in us, only increases that fullness.

The central fact of the Christian Gospel is that God's love is "gift-love" and not "need-love,"

So, this morning, simply accept the fact that you are accepted and loved by God, no matter how unremarkable or unworthy you might feel. You don't have to earn God's love. In fact, you cannot earn God's love — it's a free gift. All you need to do is to receive it and accept it. Amen.