

Community Church of Issaquah
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Saved by Grace to Sit with Christ

Rev. Vincent Lachina

There are many things about my life in the Deep South that I truly miss, and more than a few things I will never miss. For example, I miss the friendliness of the people. Wherever you go, people will be greeting you in a nice way, and this is not just your family, but most people. The South is notoriously friendly. I also miss the types of food that seem indigenous to the South – things like real grits, real buttermilk biscuits, real barbeque beef, real sweet tea, and real peaches, real watermelons, and real tomatoes. I miss all the Southern style pies – pecan, sweet potato, and buttermilk. I'd better stop with that. It's making me hungry.

Perhaps the one thing I miss the most is something that we don't have here in the Northwest. In the South, homes have large front porches where there is room to sit and visit. In many homes, like my old family home, the front porch also had a porch swing that held two or three people. It was a place where we often went to kill time or talk, and it was perhaps my favorite hangout. It was my happy place. Often times when we would visit my grandfather in a nearby small town in Mississippi, he would send all the kids out of the house and the front porch swing was our escape. As you can tell, Pop didn't really like kids, even though he had 5 of his own.

When I read the verses from Ephesians that Allan shared in today's Scripture, the verse that touched my heart and has always given me a warm heart were the verses that say:

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

That one phrase, “seated with Him in heavenly places,” creates in my mind a happy place where I can sit with Christ and have a one-on-one visit. Even though this is a promise for our lives after death when we are indeed in a heavenly place, it offers a great deal of comfort for me in those times when I go to a comfortable place, sit down, and spend time with the Lord in meditation and prayer. I tell myself each time that I am seated with Him. But how did I ever get to that place? Simple. I was saved by His grace and accepted Christ as my personal savior, and was a recipient of God's grace and love.

Ministers are asked from time to time, “What does it mean to be saved?” That isn't a hard question to answer, but often it is a hard concept for some to understand. Each of us has been at a place in our lives where we are standing outside the doors of faith that provide us with a foundation to build our lives. For Christians, being saved means that we acknowledge that we have been sinners, living our lives for our own pleasure. Admitting that we are transgressors

or sinners is one of the hardest things for us. There were certainly complications for me to understand this concept.

As I've told you before, my years before I was in my mid-teens were spent in the Catholic church. Like every good loyal Catholic, I would go to my allotted time with the priest to tell him all the bad things I had done so that he could forgive me and tell me how many Hail Mary's I would need to say in order to cleanse my slate. I perhaps should not tell you this, but often I would make up transgressions just to see what the priest would say. "Father, I stole a quarter from my mother's pocketbook" or the like. Trust me, if I had done such a thing, I would have been wearing a knot on my head. It was this formality of the Catholic faith that was very troublesome for me. Why couldn't I just go straight to God and ask for forgiveness and skip this priest on the other side of the curtain at the confessional?

When I began to look deeper into other church options, I chose a Baptist church, though living in Jackson, Mississippi, that was logical since there seemed to be one on every corner. I chose the church that had the best snacks for youth groups, plus it was the church that my good friend Elizabeth's father was pastor. I recall sitting in the office of Dr. G. Norman Price and asking him about how that church got God to forgive sins. The answer came clearly that confessing my mistakes and sins to God, and receiving his forgiveness was at the center of the beliefs of that faith congregation.

Asking for forgiveness of our transgressions is just the first step in making our way to the heavenly front porch swing

and our seat with Christ. The next step after confession and receiving forgiveness is to accept Christ as our personal savior. Dr. Price asked me, a 14-year-old, if I believed that Jesus Christ was God's Son who came to the world to save us. Even my priest had never asked me such a question. It left me with something to think about before I found an answer. Yes, I did believe that Jesus was God's son. How could I not believe that? Then, Dr. Price said, you must accept him as your own personal savior who came to life to give you forgiveness of your sins and offer you eternal life.

During a worship service a few weeks later, I walked from the balcony where the teens sat and misbehaved and went to the altar to acknowledge that I had accepted Christ as my savior and wanted to become a Christian. After the service, Dr. Price told me that I now would need to be baptized. I told him I had already been baptized when I was a baby, so did I need to do it again. You know the answer to that empty question. So, yes indeed, I was dunked in a baptismal pool in front of the whole church.

Likely, many of you have had your own experience of coming to terms with your relationship with Christ as your personal savior. There is also a more beautiful part of our establishing a relationship with Christ. It centers on two things – love and grace. When I accepted Christ, I didn't comprehend that my salvation was not just a result of what I had done as much as what God had done for me. Yes, I had asked for forgiveness of my sins and transgressions believing that my confession has cleansed me, but that wasn't the end of that process.

Christ, who had sacrificed his own human life so that I could experience forgiveness had indeed provided a way for me to cleanse my soul. But there is a deeper understanding about that whole process. I didn't initially understand that it was God who had loved me and given me a new life of faith. It wasn't as a result of my doing anything that I thought would earn me a place in heaven. Nothing I could do or had done merited that place for me. It was by the grace of God who loved me enough to give me a place in heaven. That's why that portion of the passage had a huge impact on me.

We read these words today, "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." I didn't quite get it the first time I read those words, but having read them now many times, I do understand that a love God reached down to me in my accepting my savior and lifted me up spiritually to be with Christ. Not only that, I had a seat in heaven beside Jesus. That is a powerful message that gives me so much comfort and joy, and is the reason I could not wait to share this message with you.

I seriously doubt that there is a front porch in heaven with a porch swing on it, but in my mind, I envision how joyful we all will be when we reach the realms of heaven and are blessed to sit with Christ. In my mind, I create conversations that I would like to have with Jesus, questions to ask, memories to share. But the thing that I will look forward to the most is the honor of sitting with open ears listening to Jesus talk about how much his

message of love was the source of my salvation and brought so much joy to my life.

Hopefully, when I take up my seat near Jesus I will remember to thank him for all he did for me and all he gave to me. I want him to know that I am well aware that God, his heavenly Father saved me by his grace, not my works. And I want God to know that I am grateful that I have been his handiwork and was created in Christ to do good works which God made ready for me to do. My hope is that this is the same message you are hearing and the same vision you have for your time as you sit next to Jesus in your heavenly life.