

TEXT: Lectionary readings  
THEME: God is at work in you  
SUBJECT: Salvation  
TITLE: Work Out

17th Sunday after Pentecost  
01 October 2017  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to *will* and to *work* for God’s good pleasure.”

How odd we should need help *willing* our own salvation. Yet, we know we don’t always desire what is in our best interest. Ezekiel’s question is to the point: “Why will you die, O house of Israel? Turn and live.”

This question has preoccupied theologians, philosophers, and now psychologists for centuries. Are we free to turn away from destructive ways of being and doing and embrace life-giving ways, or are our wills in bondage to forces beyond our control?

For this morning, however, I want to focus not on the willing but on the *doing*. According to Paul we not only need help willing our salvation, we also need help working for our salvation. Yes, our salvation is a matter of work as well as faith. The parable of the two sons makes it clear that doing matters most.

We are familiar with a variety of “work out” schemes to get and keep us in shape: running, CrossFit, weight lifting, biking, swimming, or a combination of some or all of the above. What I want to share with you this morning is the classic Christian “work out” for the soul.

This work out is like circuit training. We move from one exercise to the next and when the cycle is completed, we start again and again as long as we desire our own salvation. The exercises may be described as awakening, purification, illumination, and cooperation or co-creation.

“Awakenings” or wake-up calls can be triggered by almost anything, but they always arouse a desire for something more, a recognition that “I need to do something about my life.” Within each of us is a deep center, we call it “heart,” that is always awake even when we are unaware.

Our hearts can be awakened by hearing Bach’s “Double Concerto for Two Violins and Orchestra,” by the stunning colors of a sunrise or sunset, by the smile of a stranger or the touch of a lover, by the suffering of the people of Puerto Rico or the illness and death of a friend, by the words of a poet or of a prophet.

Ezekiel is trying to awaken Israel out of its slumber of victimization. Ezekiel warns them to stop blaming their ancestors for their predicament, to assume responsibility for their own lives and turn away from their self destructive attitudes and behaviors before it is too late.

The soul's work out intensifies with the process of "purification." The term purification may strike us as puritanical, but it is about the reformation of the foundations of our lives. This is the work of turning from gluttony, anger, envy, pride, lust, apathy, melancholy and despair, to hope, patience, mercy, courage, humility, fidelity and perseverance.

The third exercise in this work out for our souls is "illumination." This is where we learn more profoundly about the truth of life in all its aspects. We become more attuned to reality, our affections are continuously reshaped to be in right relationship to others and the world. The goal of illumination is to understand reality and the world in terms of God's perspective, and thus to be in loving relationship to the world in the same way as God.

The paradox is that we do not think our way into illumination. Action sensitizes cognition. We do not think our way into new ways of being and doing; rather, we act our way into new ways of seeing and understanding. By changing how we are living we open up fresh ways of knowing.

The work of becoming sober enabled Mary Karr to see the depth and breadth of her preexisting insanity, to see that she is not now who she was then.

Illumination opens the way to "cooperation" or "co-creation" with God; it is willing what God wills. Our salvation, what is in our best interests, is God's good pleasure. God is making something of us but will not coerce us to become our true selves.

Julia Cameron insisted God give back the man she wanted more than anything else in life. "Thankfully," she says, "God did not listen. A far more loving hand than mine was shaping my destiny. My job, a day at a time, was to not sabotage but to cooperate with the good that God was unfolding for me."

Salvation is not something done to us or for us but *with us*. Work out your *own* salvation with fear and trembling. Your work out routine will not be identical to anyone else's, for God is at work in you, in the uniqueness of your personality and life circumstances, enabling you both to will and work for your own salvation.