

1 Timothy 2:1-7  
September 19, 2010

South Plains

“Lord, I Been Saved”

My sermon title comes from an anthem by the same name, composed by Tom Hutcheson. Tom was one of the most faithful elders in another church. His job at the university was teaching music composition and French horn. Academic life nurtured his quiet personality and his sometimes dogmatic positions as an elder. It was hard to tell how Tom felt about anything, however, until he told you. His impassive face, the flat tone of his voice, even his glasses seemed all designed to hide his soul from public view. His passion came out in music. His symphony premiered in Germany shortly after he persuaded our choir to sing an anthem he wrote. The anthem was not symphonic; it was pure, hot gospel. We brought in jazz instrumentalists. I thought the pianist would set the piano on fire. From the squealing clarinet to the clanging cymbals to the soaring vocals, it was the most exquisite and raucous music I've ever heard in church. “Lord, I Been Saved” left no doubt that Tom Hutcheson found a way to pour out his thanks to his Savior.

I wanted to tell that story today for a couple of reasons as we elect another class of elders. Obviously, every elder will bring very different gifts to the church. Some gifts will be soft and soothing while others will rouse us to action. But, every elder has the same

responsibility for spiritual leadership in the congregation. I think spiritual leadership is the most demanding job for any minister or elder. I can teach the Bible all day. The session can run the church's programs and facilities with great efficiency. We can baptize little ones, marry the lusty, and bury the lifeless, but none of those things equals spiritual leadership.

Spiritual leadership touches hearts and minds and bodies. It goes to the soul, nurturing our spirits, striking fire to our passions, motivating action, arousing compassion, expanding our perspective to include horizons of service we didn't know existed, sometimes quickening conscience or settling an uneasy faith or opening the possibility of trust. Spiritual leadership connects the marrow of our bones to God.

That sounds very subjective and vague. In order to ground the spiritual in concrete reality, we anchor our language in the words of scripture. One of those words that gets a lot of mileage in church is the word “saved.”

I've been saved. We're saved by Christ. Those expressions of faith have different meanings for different people, and often a double meaning.

The Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, for example, includes the poignant cry, “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved (9:20).” I hear echoes of that cry in the political unrest of our own country this season. Jeremiah's people may have been suffering from a drought of rain as well as from economic

depression. Deeper than these needs in Jeremiah's mind was the spiritual crisis of Israel, a crisis that begged for grace more than rain or money, salvation by rain and grace.

The reading from Timothy also looks for salvation with a double meaning. The instructions for worship urge prayers of supplication, intercession and thanksgiving especially for kings and all who are in high positions. Why kings? Because it's the people in charge of the country who can provide us with stability, what this letter calls "a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity (2:2)." Stability is exactly the kind of salvation needed in Haiti, in Indonesia, in Congo, in Sudan and especially in Afghanistan. And, you can bet your life that Christians in Pakistan are praying that those in high positions in their government will provide peace.

One of the neat things about South Plains is the great number of ordained elders in our congregation. It's the highest office among Presbyterians. I'm a teaching elder. The rest of our session is made up of ruling elders. Typically when someone is ordained and installed we have half the congregation come forward for the laying on of hands, the symbolic blessing of elders for those new leaders. Once an elder, you're always an elder in the Presbyterian Church. That means the session and people always have back-up. We have a cadre of reserve elders who may not be on session, but who continue to exercise their ministry as spiritual

leaders: nurturing, arousing, motivating, reassuring, and quickening our life together.

I want to suggest to elders and everyone that we take up the spiritual discipline urged by this passage in First Timothy, that we pray for everyone, especially all who are in high positions. That would be an exercise in spiritual leadership that anyone could do in their private devotions, anyone who wants to be a good influence on others. No one will know if you're a Republican praying for Democrats or if you're a Democrat praying for Republicans. At this time of unrest in our national life, we can pray for our politicians, all our politicians.

Pray for salvation as you might pray before a football game, not that your team will win, but that the game will be well-played. Pray that in the rough and tumble of politics, no life-threatening injuries will occur. Pray that the common good of the whole human community will be uppermost in their minds. Pray that the strain of travel and the spotlight of campaigning will not undermine families, but will strengthen relationships and refine their commitments. And, pray with genuine thanksgiving for the good they have accomplished, the lives saved by good laws, the prosperity made possible by relative peace.

Here in America, the summer is ended and we are not saved from all our enemies, nor are we saved from economic distress. Nonetheless, we have much to be thankful for. We have enough safety and security that we

can re-build jobs and pensions. We have natural resources saved through generations of conservation. We have enough young people saved from poverty by education so that they are ready to create jobs and go to work. We can be thankful for people in high positions past and present who have been channels of blessing.

Every problem does not have to divide us. Every challenge need not turn into a partisan struggle. Sometimes injustice can be overcome by working together and counting our blessings as strengths, not just talking points against some opponent. In my mind, that cooperation is the strength of the Impact congregations. South Plains works together with thirty other churches, a synagogue and an Islamic prayer room as part of Impact. Praying together we can address injustice. Those communal efforts are spiritual leadership in the community, efforts that join with God in saving our community. Our session is the more local focus of spiritual leadership as our elders formulate goals and overcome problems.

First Timothy tells us that our instrument for this leadership is prayer: prayers for each other; prayers for those in position of leadership; prayers for God to intervene and save us. Tom Hutcheson died some years ago. His work on session was missed, of course. He had another ministry visiting older church leaders who were in nursing homes. He prayed for other elders, for his pastors and community leaders. He is a great example to me of spiritual leadership. I commend him to

us all. And, some day we'll sing with Tom, "Lord, I Been Saved."