

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Titus 3:3-11, “When God’s Kindness Appeared”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/26/2021**

I’ve never been interested in Country Club Christianity.

This is the idea of the church existing as a social connection point  
for the upper middle class to sing feel-good songs,  
pray the warm-fuzzy prayers, point fingers at the people  
who aren’t like them, and invest in the things  
that make them feel good.

There might not be much wrong with such a religion,  
but it doesn’t have much to do with Jesus,  
it doesn’t call anyone to transformation,  
and it is exposed as utterly irrelevant when the storms of life  
arise and there are real issues to confront.

What kind of storms and issues? Well the kind Paul references in this passage,  
and the kind that we face today.

When it seems like nobody tells the truth, where do we look for clarity?

When people go around hating and being hated, how can we find genuine care?

When foolish people are easily deceived, how do we identify wisdom?

When malice for our adversaries fills the air, how will we learn to be kind?

These are difficult conditions to live within: falsehood, hatred, deception, malice.

These were the characteristics that Paul identified within Titus, himself,  
and the congregation in Crete prior to the appearance  
of the kindness and love of God our Savior.

Does the work of God make a difference for people living in,  
and contributing to such conditions?

If someone has encountered the saving activity of the Living God,  
will they be moved into a different life?

Do we have access to something more than Country Club Christianity?

This incredibly dense theological passage from the Apostle Paul makes a compelling case for answering, “Yes.”

The passage begins in verse 3 by laying out these despicable traits that once characterized Paul, Titus, and their community.

They lived in terrible ways, motivated by selfish desires, and cutting others down at every opportunity.

That is not the end of their story. Verse 4 begins with the wonderful word, “But!”

We can be focused on our money and lose all our friends ... but!

We can get sucked down 1,000 trails of escapism and apathy ... but!

We can deceive ourselves and others about what is really happening ... but!

There’s a lot of hope in that word, because it marks a tremendous turning point.

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared!

Now, ask yourself:

What is it that appeared which sparks this great turning point of a “But”?

What appeared was, “the kindness and love of God our Savior.”

When did God’s kindness and love appear?

When were these divine characteristics made visible?

When did people see God’s kindness in the flesh?

In the person of Jesus.

It’s through the incarnation that God’s kindness and love appeared.

If that’s correct, then we can say paraphrase this line as,

“But when Jesus appeared,”

What happened when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared in the person of Jesus? “He saved us.”

Who saved us? Not Jesus! God our Savior saved us.

Why did God our Savior effect this salvation?

Was it because Paul and Titus and the early Christians just worked so hard?

Was it because they really believed in their hearts and never doubted?

Was it because they did devotions everyday and served others?

Was it because they voted for the right people  
and gave lots of money to the poor?

No! V. 5 states, “he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done,  
but because of his...mercy.”

Because of God’s mercy. That’s it.

It turns out that salvation isn’t about us. That is a big hit to our pride,  
but one that we absolutely must come to terms with.

Salvation is about what God has don, not what we have done.

It’s about unmerited mercy.

Mercy is not getting what we deserve.

A community that has lived and exemplified these terrible traits  
deserves some kind of a bad outcome.

But! (Paul says) But! because of God’s mercy they didn’t get what they deserve.

That’s *why* God our Savior effected salvation.

But *how* did God bring about salvation?

Through Jesus?

Not yet!

V. 5 continues, that God “saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by  
the Holy Spirit.”

That’s two ways.

The washing of rebirth.

God’s salvation comes from being cleansed,  
from rinsing off our sin.

This washing happens through rebirth, or what is sometimes called  
being “born again.”

Some folks get a furrowed brow if you talk about  
being a born again Christian, but there’s no shame in it!

Something we might miss is that the washing of rebirth  
is a strongly feminine metaphor for God's salvation.

Think about it: We are cleansed and given new life by our passage  
through the womb of God's Spirit!

We are then spiritually clean as new-born babies.  
(Presumably, new born babies that have had all the gunk cleaned off of them.)  
This washing is made tangible in the church through the waters of baptism.

We also experience salvation through the renewal of the Holy Spirit.  
Through salvation we aren't only made new like babies,  
but also as new versions of our own selves.

When are made "like new" our spiritual dents and dings are repaired.

All of this is not our doing. It's the work of the Holy Spirit who  
(Paul explains in v. 6) "God poured out on us generously  
through Jesus Christ our Savior."

Now we get to Jesus!

In this theological portrait it is God the Father doing the pouring,  
and it's the Holy Spirit who is being poured out to effect salvation,  
but the Spirit is poured *through* Jesus Christ.

So maybe Jesus is the pitcher that contains the Spirit?

At any rate, this is one of the many wonderful moments in Paul's writing  
where we are drawn into the dance of the Trinity.

God is not a distant and unmovable force making decrees.  
God is a personal, intimate, multifaceted being who  
brings the healing dance of the divine community  
to the places we need it most.

We have seen that salvation has come because of God's mercy,  
we have seen that salvation has come by washing, rebirth, and renewal,  
but for what purpose?

In v. 7 Paul indicates the purpose of salvation with a wonderful "so that."

God did all of this "so that, having been justified by his grace,  
we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."

The first half of this phrase moves from mercy to grace.  
If mercy is *not getting* what we do deserve,  
then grace is getting what we *don't deserve*.  
By God's grace we are ... *justified*.

We don't deserve it. We haven't earned it. It doesn't show up  
on our list of accomplishments. But nevertheless we are justified.

So, uh...is that a good thing? What is justification, anyway?

Justification is a legal term that has to do  
with a person's status before the judge.  
If someone stands before the judge and the judge declares  
that they are "not guilty" then they have been moved  
from a status of being condemned  
to a status of being free,  
and therefore they are justified in the eyes of the court.

That adds clarity to what it means to be saved,  
but why have we been saved and justified? What is the outcome?  
So that ... we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Heirs. So that we might become *heirs* of God.

To be an heir, a person must be part of the family.  
The purpose of salvation is to be brought  
into the family of God, to be given access  
to all the rights and privileges  
of a child of the Creator of the Universe.

This is a spectacular outcome which greatly relativizes our reliance  
on earthly families, earthly citizenship, and earthly status symbols.

If you are an heir to the Kingdom of God,  
why would you argue about earthly treasures or family genealogies?  
Gaining status among our friends and colleagues seems frivolous  
when we understand the new identity we have been given  
through mercy and through grace.

What is the result of all this?

Paul says in v. 8, "I want you to stress these things so that"  
(so that!) "those who have trusted in God may be careful  
to devote themselves to doing what is good."

Our salvation does not *come* from being good or doing good.

Not at all! It's entirely the unmerited grace and mercy  
of the Trinitarian dance we have been invited into.

But! Having been renewed. Having been cleansed through rebirth,  
we are freed to live in what is good.

We are no longer bound to the ways of the world that bring  
so much pain and division.

God's grace is both a gift and a summons.

It's what Pastor Earl Palmer called the "surprise gift love" of God  
which we never could have expected,  
and it is also a summons into a new world  
that we never thought possible.

This is no Country Club Christianity.

This is living into the gift of new life for the benefit of others.

This is taking a risk and having faith that God will show up.

This is a life with purpose that goes beyond ourselves  
and which has the potential to upend the powers  
of this world which seem so set in their ways.

This is the invitation which God sets before us.

Are you ready?

The opportunity to live it out begins  
as soon as you leave this building.