

## Paint by Number

*Philippians 2:12-18 ~ November 27, 2016 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church-Dell Rapids*

At my eleventh birthday I received a “paint by number” kit. On the cover of the box was a beautiful picture of the head and shoulders of a black stallion. Its eyes were flashing and its mane was flowing back. I loved the picture. So the very next day I got to work. When I set out the art board, I could see the general design of the picture on the box cover. But it was very different. It was just wavy lines that formed empty spaces. Some of the spaces were very large. Some were tiny. If you squinted your eyes just right, you could sort of make out the flashing black stallion, but it was hidden in the mass of lines.

Next I unpacked the set of 12 colors. As I expected black was the biggest bottle, but there were many other colors I did not expect; white and grey, red and yellow, and even blue and green. They all were going to be part of the picture. I would never have thought to use some of those colors to paint a black horse, but evidently the original artist knew better. All these colors were designed into the “paint by number” set to give it the depth and meaning necessary to elevate the art to masterpiece level.

As you know, paint by number means that each of the areas on the paint board had a little number printed in it that corresponded to one of the colors in the kit. To create the painting I had to very carefully paint in the shape on the art board with the correct color. I started with a great deal of enthusiasm. Even though I was pretty careful, painting inside the lines was a challenge for me. Never-the-less, in a short time I was feeling pretty successful.

In the first burst of enthusiasm I got about half the painting finished. But then there was about a week before my interest renewed enough to continue the work. The next break was about a month long, but I did come back to it. Then sometime before my twelfth birthday I notice the paint pots were starting to dry out. I pushed myself to finish before they were useless. The end result was not perfect but it was not a bad approximation of the beautiful artwork on the cover of the box. I could see in it the wonderful artistry of the one who had designed it. I could also see the less than perfect attempt I had made to follow that design. In the end, it was a “paint by number” masterpiece that joined my effort with the artistry of the original master in a very satisfactory and rewarding way.

Now this story does relate to what Paul teaches in today’s text:

***Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.***

This text from Philippians 2 is a tricky one for Christians. And I am hoping that the illustration of a “paint by number” kit will help us to unpack what Paul means when he says, “**...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.**” First let's talk about why this text is so tricky. Then we can examine how a “paint by number” illustration helps us to understand it.

**"Working out our own salvation..."** is tricky because it can start us down the path of “works righteousness” in a hurry. If we fail to understand the full context of the apostle's words we start thinking about how we can do God's law in order to earn our own salvation. That's kind of what it sounds like, isn't it. After all when the Apostle exhorts us to work out our salvation it kind of sounds like we are on our own before God. It sounds like we either get it done or we won't have the salvation we so desire. We think to ourselves, "No wonder Paul says to do this work in fear and trembling. Being made responsible for our own salvation terrifies us!"

But St. Paul does not mean that we are responsible for our own salvation through works of the law. Several places in his letters he makes it very clear that works of the law do not profit us in anyway. In fact Paul emphatically teaches that works of the law actually put us to death. As we read in Romans 3:20:

***Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.***

This makes it completely clear that **"Working out our own salvation..."** does not mean that we gain salvation through works of the law. Therefore, it must mean something else. To be consistent with Scripture it must mean something that grants us salvation by grace through faith. We must be careful not to take this text out of context. If we do, we may come to believe that this is God's way of demanding works from us so that we can be saved. Once we remember that righteousness does not come through works of the law and have that understanding firmly in our mind then we can proceed to explore what the Apostle is actually teaching here.

The key to understanding this text comes in the following verse, verse 13 where Paul writes:

***for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.***

Yes even as we are **working out our own salvation**, God is working in us to fulfill his good purpose. That is the absolutely crucial context required even to begin to understand what is involved in **working out our own salvation**. Our **working out our own salvation** is really God's working salvation in us by grace through faith. As God works in us to fulfill his good

purpose, our obedience brings us into the process of ***working out our own salvation***. Our ***working out our own salvation*** is inseparable from God's work in us.

Now this way of speaking can be a little confusing for us. So let's put it another way. Many Christians get confused on these issues. We are going to compare two different ways of living our lives. The first way we will call **works righteousness**. That means people who attempt to please God by fulfilling the law. The second way we will call **working out our own salvation**. This means that through the Holy Spirit, God works in us to use our obedience to achieve his goals for our lives. That obedience is not to the law, but to the Spirit.

Until we understand the difference between these two ways of living we will often assume the wrong things. The fundamental distinction between these two ways of living has to do with who initiates the action. In the case of **works righteousness** we initiate the action based on our understanding of the Law. Yes, we give God credit for the law. But we assign credit to ourselves for taking the action. In the end the Law itself destroys us, because it only has the power to kill, not to save.

What Paul is talking about in today's text is a life where the Christian waits for God's leading to come from inside us. We do not look to the Law for guidance, rather we look for the leading of the Holy Spirit. Now God's Holy Spirit always reflects the righteousness of God. It is the same righteousness that is expressed in all the covenants laid out in the Bible. However we must never try to control our actions through the Law. That is actually disobedience. Instead we must be obedient to God's work inside us, which is the leading of the Holy Spirit. When we try to apply our understanding of the Law to a specific action we always fail because of the true power of the Law is in sin's hands. Instead Christians seek to act in the way God desires in each specific instance. We seek his guidance for each action on a case by case basis.

Now I'm sure this explanation is bit perplexing. Our minds want something concrete. We want to know how God wants things done as a general rule. We are impatient with having to look to God's Spirit to guide in each action on a case by case basis. We say to ourselves, "How will we ever know that we are doing the right thing? How can we be sure that we are really doing what God wants?" It is this uncertainty and the humility that comes with it that are the critical characteristics of the Christian life Paul is talking about. This is precisely why he characterizes it as ***"working out our own salvation with fear and trembling."*** Yes, there is a great deal of uncertainty involved in shaping our lives entirely around the leading of the Holy Spirit. That is why we call it Faith.

This is why the analogy of paint by number is so helpful in understanding the nature of the Christian life. The greatest artist of all time has designed a beautiful work of art. That work of art is you and your life from its very beginning. God intends that work of art, which is you, to extend into eternity. But you can't see the whole work of art right now. It is progressing day by day. Each day shapes a small part of God's masterwork in you. Through the Holy Spirit's work a color is suggested for each day as you come to it. You color in each day's shape as you live your life. It is done on a piece by piece basis. When you follow the Spirit's leading and paint your life according to his guidance then your actions give each day the color God intends. In this way then the overall work of art gains the depth, hues, and magnitude that God has designed into you and your salvation. The Holy Spirit's work is to guide you action by action so that you can complete the picture the way God has designed it.

Does this mean that your actions have no independent meaning? Not at all. Your choices for your day to day life have everything to do with the actual color that goes into the masterpiece that God has designed in you. The more you listen to the Spirit's leading the better you are able to complete the picture according to God's design. This is the obedience Paul talks about to the Philippians. This is what it means to work out your own salvation.

But does that mean that it is really only our action that matters? No not at all. For your action takes place inside the design for your salvation that God has built into your life. It is not a rigid set of rules, but a pattern that reveals itself through your relationship with God, the Holy Spirit. It is something that happens day by day as you live your life trusting that God will guide you.

God is determined that you will be his beloved child. He has created in you something wonderful and beautiful. But part of his design is that by the Spirit's guidance you can bring depth and color into your life through the way you live and the things you do. This is a great wonder and a powerful promise from God. He will not fail you or let you fall. But he will let you live and be yourself. Put your hand in God's hand. Let him lead you each day. Paint your life with the colors God suggests. And wait with patience for the day that everything is revealed. In that day you will see the incredible beauty of what God has done in His masterpiece that is you.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.