

Sermon, March 6, 2022

Romans 10:8b -13

“Belief, Confession, Salvation”

Belief, confession, and salvation - each of these goes to the core of our relationship with God, particularly, as that relationship relates to Jesus Christ.

First, we begin with the concept of belief. What does it mean to believe? In religious terms we can say that we acknowledge the simple fact of existence, i.e., that we accept that there is a God. We may all have different ideas about the form or way God exists, but without a basic acceptance of God's existence all the rest makes no sense. It is the same with Jesus. When I was a child, I often heard people equate faith with the belief that Jesus once existed, and there are still those who believe that he is a fictional character. But there is no doubt that a person named Jesus of Nazareth once walked upon the earth. The legitimate question is not that he was, but, rather, who and what he was. Was he a man? Was he a God? Or was he both?

Secondly, there is the question of doctrine. Later in the service we will be reciting the Apostle's Creed, which was formulated in the 5th century, proclaiming the basic beliefs of the church. Some parts of it may be hard to accept for the modern mind. But belief does not necessarily mean taking something literally but can be accepted for its symbolic meaning.

Notice verse 10 in today's reading. Paul writes, “For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” That would seem to suggest that the true essence of belief resides in the heart rather than the mind, although it does not negate the importance of mind. After all, Jesus did say, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” But it is in the heart that God takes up permanent residence.

Also remember that belief is intimately tied with faith, and faith in its truest sense means trust. To say that you believe in Jesus means you place your trust in him.

Which brings us to confession of faith. Again, Paul says, “...and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” Earlier he says, “...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” But I have to ask if confessing with your lips is enough? Isn't it just as important that we confess with our lives that Jesus is Lord? In other words, if you say that Jesus is Lord, but live lives that contradict what Jesus stood for, and called us to do, do we really recognize him as Lord?

I think of that powerful scene in “The Godfather” when Michael Corleone is in church having his child baptized, and mouthing words of faith, while at the same time his enemies are being killed by his henchmen. Is he really confessing the lordship of Jesus? That's a rather drastic example, but you get what I mean.

Paul also speaks of God raising Jesus from the dead. Over the centuries many have argued the true nature of the resurrection. Does it mean that Jesus' physical body actually got up and walked out of the tomb? Paul appears to speak of a transformed or glorified body, while others see it as something of a deep spiritual awakening within his disciples. We can never know with certainty what happened on that glorious morning, but what truly matters is whether or not the power of his resurrection resides in your heart.

This brings us to the question of salvation. What does it mean to be saved? Essentially it has to do with reconciliation- perhaps a covenant of peace between God and humanity born out of divine love and grace - that we are forgiven our sin and released from the power of death. Some see it as an all-expense paid trip to heaven, but I see it as more than that. There was a time in my life that was very dark - a time when I felt lost. I found it hard to see meaning and purpose in life, even questioned whether life was worth living. The power of death can mean more than the cessation of biological existence. It can also have to do with a death of spirit within this life. But just when things looked bleakest God reached down and pulled me out of that darkness, gave my life meaning and purpose, and pointed me down a brighter pathway, and I made up my mind, as Shakespeare said in 'Henry V', "God shall be my hope, my stay, my guide and lantern to my feet." This, to me, was salvation. Others may have had similar experiences, or different troubles in the lives, but found New Life, when they made room for God in their hearts, when they saw in Jesus a pathway to God.

There was a book that was very important to me at that time called "The Seven Story Mountain", by the Trappist monk, and one of the great spiritual teachers of the 20th century, Thomas Merton. Through him I began to understand that salvation is just a beginning - the start of a great journey of growing into God - a pilgrim's progress if I may. Not always a smooth and easy journey - times when doubts and fears and challenges to faith rear their ugly heads - but those apparent obstacles often turn out to be opportunities to further experience the love and power of God. Hard and bumpy roads, but well worth the trip! Amen.

**Let us pray:** Faithful God, we praise you that you love us and come to us in Jesus to reconcile the world to yourself. We thank you that Jesus walked the path of obedience all the way to the cross and that you raised Jesus up to draw us to yourself. Jesus handed himself over to death knowing that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it will not bear fruit. Teach us, like Jesus, to hand ourselves over in love for you, for one another, and for all people. May we take part in your work of suffering and redeeming love, lifting up the oppressed, binding the broken hearted, challenging the powerful, drawing all in a community of love. Amen.