

THE WAY OF LIFE

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 21, 2016

Based on Mark 1:16-20, Colossians 1:19-23, 2:6-7, Romans 10:9-10

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Ten Truths that Change Life.” Last Sunday, we looked at our profound human need for salvation and the central Biblical message that God acts to save us by coming to us in Jesus Christ. Christ offers his life for us on the cross, and so creates atonement—the wiping away of our sin, so that we may be brought into saving connection with God. As the apostle Paul said in the passage that was our focus last week: “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement, effective through faith. (Romans 3:23-25)

But if God has acted through Christ to save us, what exactly do we need to do in order to experience that salvation in our own lives? How can we receive God’s salvation? This will be our focus this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer.

When people have perceived that God acts to save us, a common idea that emerges is that in order for us to receive God’s salvation, we must make ourselves worthy. We need to achieve an appropriate level of moral goodness and spiritual purity in order for God to grant us salvation. Many people have this notion today. This is what Paul thought through all of his early life. But he came to realize that we can never make ourselves worthy enough, because as he said, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)

But in Christ Paul saw that God acts with grace. Grace, as we saw two weeks ago, is God’s unmerited beneficence—the way that God blesses us even though we are not worthy. Through grace we are justified, or put right with God, as a gift, Paul says, and it all happens through God’s action in Jesus Christ. *[We are now justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement. Romans 3:24-25]*

So we do not earn salvation; God gives us salvation through Christ. But then the question arises, “How exactly do we receive that salvation that God offers to us?” Paul answers that God’s salvation becomes effective in us through faith. *[. . . effective through faith. Romans 3:25b]* We receive salvation by faith; or as Paul says a little later in that same passage, “God justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.” [Romans 3:26]

The truth that we are saved by faith is a life-changing truth. It was completely life-changing for Paul. It was life-changing for Martin Luther—his realization that we are saved by faith was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. It was life-changing for Methodist founder John Wesley. But today for many people the idea that salvation comes to us through faith seems a routine notion, not particularly life-changing. But if for

some people faith in Christ is not really life-changing, the reason, quite often, is because people do not fully grasp what faith truly is.

A common idea today is that to have faith in Christ means to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior. This seems to be what the passage was saying that we heard in the Scripture readings this morning: “If you declare with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved” (Romans 10:9-10) So, people think, to be a Christian—to be someone who receives salvation through Jesus—means to believe that Jesus is the Savior. But if a Christian is someone who believes that Jesus is the Savior, this is tantamount to saying that a Cleveland Cavaliers fan is someone who believes that the Cavs are a basketball team. We would object, of course, and point out that it is just a simple fact that the Cavs are a basketball team. (It is a fact that Jesus is the Savior.) Cavs fans are people who have their heart in the team, who have a commitment to the team, who follow and support the team, and who are at the games, either literally at the Q or virtually on TV. This image can help us to get a more accurate idea of what it really means to have faith in Christ.

You will note in that passage from Romans 10 that Paul talks about “believing in your heart.” So faith is more than a matter of the head; it is not just giving intellectual assent to an idea about Jesus. It is a movement of the heart, a commitment of the self. Moreover, the word that is translated in this passage as “believe,” is the Greek word *pisteuo*, a very important word which means “to have faith.” Faith includes belief, but it is much more than just agreeing with a religious idea. In the Bible, the quintessential picture of faith in the Old Testament is Abraham, who not only believes that God is out there; Abraham trusts in God, and follows God as God calls him to journey to the Promised Land. In the New Testament, the quintessential picture of faith is the disciples as they respond to Jesus’ call. In that passage that we heard from the gospel of Mark [1:17], notice that when Jesus calls the disciples he does not say, “I want you to believe some things about me.” He says, “Follow me.” Again, faith involves not only belief in one’s mind that Jesus represents God’s truth; faith involves a trust in Christ, and a personal commitment to Christ, which results in following Christ in one’s life.

Along this line, in the passage from Romans, Paul couples his statement about “believing in your heart” with a statement about “declaring with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.” Today, as many people imagine that being a Christian means having an idea or belief in your mind about Jesus being the Savior, quite a few people think of this as an inward, private thing. Religion just becomes a matter between me and God. But clearly this is not what Paul is talking about. The word in our passage translated “declare” or “confess” is the Greek word *homologeō*, which means “to declare publicly.” It is one thing to have a private idea in your mind. It is quite another to take a public stand for a cause. To declare publicly that Jesus is Lord is to make a commitment, to put yourself

out there. In some settings, it means to take some risk. At the very least, it means to stand up for Christ. This is why whenever anyone joins the church, whether in Confirmation or coming as a new member, they are asked to stand up in a worship service and declare that Jesus is Lord—they affirm in the service of reception of new members that they accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

To declare that Jesus is Lord thus means that other people are going to know that we are Christians. There are many people today who consider themselves Christian; but no one else knows that they are Christian, because they never talk about their faith, they never publicly identify themselves as Christians, and they look and act just like everybody else. But the Scripture suggests that the life of a Christian will declare that Jesus is Lord. This does not mean that we go around saying to everyone, “Jesus is Lord.” That would make people rather nervous, and is probably not the best form of evangelism. Rather to declare that Jesus is Lord means that we are willing to talk about our faith and, above all, that our life gives evidence of our faith—in what we do with our time and our resources, and in the values by which we live, our life declares that Jesus is Lord.

The whole idea of declaring that Jesus is Lord can help us to understand what faith is. Faith includes belief in the sense of affirming spiritual truth; when we declare that Jesus is Lord we affirm that Jesus is the Risen Savior who now reigns above all. At the same time, and far more, faith involves a devotion of the heart, an orientation of one’s life. To declare that Jesus is Lord means we that look to Jesus for truth and guidance, we trust in Jesus as the one who can and will deliver us, and we follow Jesus in life.

Faith is thus a movement of the spirit that puts us into a real, personal connection with Christ, and this kind of faith is life-changing.

Last week as we talked about salvation we used the image of a saving connection, and we particularly focused on the example of the Modern Express cargo ship, which foundered in the Mediterranean a few weeks ago. The helpless ship, in serious trouble, was a good example of our troubled human condition and our need for salvation. We noted that the answer for the ship and its 22 sailors came in the form of rescuers from the outside, who airlifted the sailors one by one into helicopters and finally managed to attached a line from a tugboat to the ship to tow it to safe harbor; and we saw this as an illustration how God comes to us to rescue us from sin, trouble, and death. God reaches to us in Jesus Christ to save us.

But if you were a sailor on that ship, there is one thing that you would need to do as the helicopter dropped a line to pull you off of the ship. You would need to take hold of the line. You would need to make the connection on your side in order to be lifted up to safety. We likewise need to take hold of the salvation that God offers to us. This essentially is what faith is—making the connection with Jesus Christ who reaches to us with saving love and power.

Furthermore, in the case of the Modern Express, you will note that making the connection was the beginning of a journey. The sailors were whisked up into helicopters to fly back to the mainland; the ship, once attached to the tugboat, began a journey toward a harbor in Spain. Likewise, once we connect ourselves to Christ in faith, it is the start of a tremendous journey—of growing in faith, and sharing with Christ in doing good works so that others can experience the grace and help of God. This is exactly what we see in the disciples. Once they connect themselves with Christ, they embark on a great journey of growing in faith and sharing in the ministry of Christ. Indeed Paul used the image of a journey in the passage we heard from Colossians, when he said, “As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to journey with him.” (Col. 2:6) The word translated here as “journey” is the Greek word *peripateo*, which means to walk. Having connected with Christ through faith, we now walk with Christ.

Moreover, it is not a solitary journey, but a journey with others. The disciples journey as a group. So often today, people want to think that Christian faith can be simply a matter of private piety. I can take a walk in the woods and feel close to God; who needs the church or anyone else? But whenever we see authentic faith in the Scriptures, it draws people into community with others; as Jesus would say, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among you.” (Matt. 18:20)

So the journey of faith includes finally three key elements—spiritual formation (our personal spiritual growth), spiritual fellowship (sharing with other Christians in faith), and good works of service in the world. Notice, however, that these elements are not the prerequisite for a connection with Christ. People have often made the mistake of thinking that we have to purify our spirits and have a certain level of involvement with the church and do good works in order to make ourselves worthy of a connection with Christ. But as we have seen, Christ comes to us with saving power while we are still unworthy, before we have done any of this. The elements of the Christian life are not the requirements for a connection with Christ; they are the result of a connection with Christ. We connect with Christ through faith alone; and it is then, as we are in connection with Christ, that we are drawn into a journey of spiritual formation, we are moved to share with one another in Christian fellowship, and we are empowered to do good in our own day.

Of course, if we are not doing any of these things, then we have to wonder about our connection with Christ. As the apostle James observed, if we are not engaging in good works, there must be something wrong with our faith; or as he literally put it, “Faith without works is dead.” (James 2:17)

Think again of the image of the Cavs fan. Suppose a guy considers himself a Cavs fan, but he never watches any of the games, he never follows any sports stories about the team, he never gives much thought or time or energy to the Cavs at all. We would say that his identity as a Cavs fan is just an idea in his mind rather than a reality. The same sort of thing happens in the religious scene in America today. People will

consider themselves Christian, but it is only an idea in the mind. It is like being a sailor on that ship who believes that the helicopter is up there and that it has the power to save, but who never takes hold of the line.

The Bible calls us to faith—to take hold of the salvation that God extends to us in Jesus Christ. To do so is transformational, for then we are lifted up in the grace and promise of God, we are brought into real fellowship with Christ, we are moved to share in the values and purposes and works of Christ—we are enabled to journey as disciples of Jesus Christ in His way of life.