

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
August 7, 2011
Romans 10.5-15
“Lips – Heart – Feet”
Pastor John Guthrie

A salesman was demonstrating unbreakable combs in a department store. He was impressing the people who stopped by to look by putting the comb through all sorts of torture and stress. Finally to impress even the skeptics in the crowd, he bent the comb completely in half, and it snapped with a loud crack. Without missing a beat, he bravely held up both halves of the 'unbreakable' comb for everyone to see and said, "And this, ladies and gentlemen, is what an unbreakable comb looks like on the inside."

I am going to develop an argument today that our reading from Romans is in large part about sales, but a very different kind of sales than we typically encounter. We are called to make Jesus known, and God will take care of closing the deal. Furthermore, what we have to tell the world about is the best news it has ever heard. More about that in just a bit.

In order to make some sense of what's going on in this passage from Romans, the tenth chapter, we have to read it in its context. That context begins in the first verse of chapter nine and ends with the last verse of chapter 11. In these three chapters, Paul wrestles with the question of what is now to happen to the Jews, given that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish Law. What is God's plan for the people whom God chose with Abraham? Is God now done with them, since Christ has come?

The short answer to that last question is “no.” We haven't time this morning to survey Paul's response to all of these questions, but it is critically important to see what his concern is in these three chapters.

Throughout this discussion, Paul notes that strict adherence to the ancient Law of Moses has been replaced, or better, fulfilled, in God's coming among us in Christ Jesus. The Jews had counted on the Law, in a way, to save them: to ensure that they were living in the way that God intended for them, for in that way of living was life.

Paul now claims that salvation has been given as a free gift through Christ Jesus. Rigid adherence to a set of commandments cannot give life. Only Christ can give life. So, Paul claims, “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.”

This passage has often been taken out of context in order to support a simplistic and dangerous route to salvation. There are some who would claim that this confessing and believing are all that are needed in order to get into heaven, and to escape hell. But the gospel is not about fire insurance, or escaping the fires of hell. That bears repeating: the gospel is not about fire insurance. You and I are not in the business of selling fire insurance.

In fact, the gospel is not about you or me or us at all. It's about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and only about God. And by the way, what we do here in this space every Sunday is in part an expression of the gospel. Therefore what we do here is not about you or me or us at all:

it's about the triune God, and only about God.

Expressions of Christianity that boil down to fire insurance for individuals are stunted expressions, just as those forms of Christianity that promise prosperity and wealth in return for believing are warped and dangerous. Of course you and I are called to profess our faith and to believe that the Father raised Jesus. But that is only the beginning, and just the barest beginning.

To summarize what has been said thus far, be sure to keep the context of this passage firmly in mind. Paul is here dealing with the question of what is going to happen to the Jews and to their adherence to the Law of Moses, because, Paul claims, Jesus has fulfilled and replaced that Law.

Therefore when he says to us that we must confess with our lips and believe in our hearts, it is a refutation of the ancient Jewish belief that life comes from adherence to Torah. Life comes rather, Paul claims, in living in, for, and with Christ Jesus.

Furthermore, as expressed elsewhere in Romans, we have to remember that we cannot save ourselves by confessing and believing: salvation is a free gift from God. We cannot earn it and we cannot deserve it. It is free. We don't make ourselves worthy of the gift by confessing and believing; in fact, none of us are worthy, and there is nothing we can do to make ourselves worthy. It's a good thing salvation is a free gift.

A word or two about what Paul means when he uses the word "believe," not only here but in all of his writing. He means more than just intellectual agreement. He means more than simply believing that Jesus is God and was raised by God from the dead. He means trust, the trust that we place in Jesus when we give our lives away to him.

During my years as a Boy Scout leader I had the opportunity to rappel down the sides of cliffs several times. Rappellers explicitly place their trust in their equipment, their ropes and carabiners and anchors. If we didn't trust it, we never would lean out against the side of the cliff, with our bodies more or less perpendicular to the cliff face.

That's kind of like the trust we are called to place in Christ Jesus. We will typically be called to do things that we are not comfortable doing. We will be summoned to take risks for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of God's kingdom. The Christian life is not a safe life: it involves risk, and it involves trusting God. That trust doesn't come all at once, but it grows, and it should be constantly growing.

That's what Paul means when he uses the word, "believe." Not just believe as in, "I believe Jesus is God and was raised from the dead." But more in the line of the Covenant Prayer drafted by John Wesley in the late 18th century. The Covenant Prayer goes like this:

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
Exalted for you or brought low for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
You are mine, and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.

When you and I can trust like that, then we will have truly understood what Paul means when he uses the word, "believe."

Paul writes, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" That last part, about beautiful feet, is drawn from the prophet Isaiah.

Here's where our salesmanship becomes real. Except, as noted above, the product sells itself. The product is Christ Jesus, and all we have to do is proclaim him.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at some of those kingdom parables in chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel. There we read that the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field; when a certain person finds that treasure he goes and sells all that he has in order to buy the field with its treasure. And the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great value, so great that one sells all that she has in order to buy that one priceless pearl.

That's what we have to sell. It is priceless. We have the greatest news there is to tell. We proclaim the one who gives our lives meaning and value, and nothing else can compare. Not wealth or security or possessions or power or family or leisure or pleasure. Nothing else compares. And we are called to proclaim Christ Jesus, by what we do and what we say.

Yes, we are called, even commanded to be evangelists. In Greek the word evangelism is intimately connected with our English word "gospel," or "good news." You and I have good news to proclaim. In fact, priceless news: the news of Jesus Christ and the deep joy and peace that derives from living in, for, and through him.

So take every opportunity to share Jesus with your friends and family. Really. Always with love, never with stridency. Always with love.

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