

“The Word of Faith”

Liturgical Date: Proper 14 (A)

Primary Text: Romans 10:5-17

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, is the Epistle Lesson from Romans 10. This text has some wonderful things to say to us about the nature of salvation and faith. The title of the sermon is “The Word of Faith”.

As the sermon begins today, let us ponder a few things. Let’s say that you are telling someone about Jesus. You do a pretty good job. You tell the other person that Jesus is the Son of God, in fact God in the flesh, born of the virgin Mary, who came to save us from our sins. You go on to explain that Jesus had an incredible ministry of preaching, teaching, and miracles. That He was perfect, not sinning even once, thus when He was sent to the cross to die for our sins that He would be the perfect sacrifice. His death paid the sin debt that we owe. Finally, you tell them that Jesus then rose from the dead on the first Easter Sunday and now we can live eternally with Him. The person that you are witnessing to is interested. Then they ask you, “Well this all sounds great, how do I become a Christian? How do I become a follower of this Jesus?” What would you say in such a situation?

Maybe it sounds like an easy question. As good Lutherans we would probably saying something about grace, certainly about faith. We know that we are saved by grace through faith. We also may bring up Baptism, telling the person that they need to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy

Ghost. But maybe it is a little harder to answer those questions than we may think. Because what if the person wants to know more of the “how”. “But how does this happen? I mean, I get it that I need to have faith and be baptized. What exactly do I need to do? How does this work? I want to be sure I do this right so that I am really saved?” And then there are those terms that Christians often use: believe, faith, baptism. What do those mean? Not everyone understands or defines them in the same way.

Over the centuries and millennia of Christian history, many have gotten how one becomes a Christian totally wrong, or partially wrong. But we need to make sure we have this right. What bigger issue is there than the salvation of our very soul? Here are some false and misguided things that different people and groups have come up with to try to answer that question, “How do I become a Christian?” There are those who have turned Christianity into a system of morals. The thinking is this, if you follow the teachings of Jesus pretty closely, doing the things that he said to do and not doing the things that he said to do—at least for the most part then you are a Christian. Well, we should know this can’t be right. What has happened in this thinking is we have turned Jesus into another wise teacher like Buddha, Confucius, or a whole number of others. Basically, Christianity is now reduced to the same as the other religions of the world that are works based—be a good person and you will probably be OK. There is no adequate answer given for our dealing with our sin debt in that thinking.

Well, others have gotten a little closer and they will say that you need to have faith in Jesus. But then they add in works. You believe, but if you don’t do enough good or do too much bad, then there are some rituals you need to do to stay “in”. Do your best, and Jesus does the rest. This is obviously an improper

mixing of Law and Gospel and not pure grace, which is undeserved favor-receiving forgiveness when you don't deserve it. Because this thinking has us doing at least some of the work of salvation and makes it dependent on our actions.

But let's go even further. What if a group claims that, "yes, salvation is by grace through faith." But then they answer the question of "how do I become a Christian" with putting the burden on the person who wants to become a Christian. Very common in American Evangelicalism is the idea of the "sinners' prayer" and "altar calls". Some evangelists on the radio have even instructed their listeners to touch the radio or on TV to touch the TV and repeat a prayer after them. Or there is an altar call where one makes their way to the front and repeats a prayer. As I have told you before, I am not saying no one has ever become a Christian after repeating these prayers and going down for an altar call. However, we don't generally practice these methods as Lutheran Christians? Why not? Because it puts a lot of the emphasis of becoming a Christian on the person. While this may not be the intention, people can end up trusting in the act of them praying the prayer or going down front more than Jesus and the faith He delivers. Furthermore, we do not see one single example in the ministry of Jesus or the Apostles where they did anything like this. We don't read about Peter, Paul, or the other Apostles preaching the Gospel and then inviting their hearers down for an altar call to "ask Jesus into their hearts". Jesus didn't end the Sermon on the Mount, nor any of His sermons with one either. Jesus did not lead the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, or the thief on the cross in the sinners' prayer. My challenge stands, if anyone can find anything like this in the Bible, please show it to me, seriously.

Really this comes down to an important question of “What is faith?” People throw the word faith around a lot in trivial ways. One may say, “I have faith that the Braves will come through and win the World Series this year.” But would the stake their life on it? Not likely. “Faith” has been perverted by some ministers to essentially be a vehicle that one gets things like prosperity and health from God. That is not the “Word of Faith” that St. Paul is talking about in our text for today. Furthermore, is faith something that we create or is it something that God creates? Do we “put *our* faith in Jesus” or does Jesus put faith in me? This distinction is important. If salvation is based on a faith that I already have or create, I am in big trouble. Because my faith is limited and can fail. But the faith that comes from God cannot and will not fail. Faith in Jesus is biblically a complete *trust* in Him. It is trusting God with your eternal life, even more so than you trust the brakes on your car from keeping you from going over a cliff or a parachute to save you from a fall. Alas, even baptism is not properly understood by many. They see it as a human work or symbol. Something we are doing for God, rather than something God is doing for us.

This takes us back to our important questions at the beginning of the sermon. How do I become a Christian, then? What do I need to do? How does this whole becoming a follower of Jesus work? Fortunately, our text from Romans 10 gives us the answers that we need to know about this. Our text has some really great news, some great Gospel for us today. Put simply, salvation must be a 100% work of God. There is really nothing one can do to become a Christian other than trust in Jesus and His Word! It can't be 50-50, even 90-10, it has to be 100% the work of God.

In looking at these verses from Romans 10, it is also helpful to know that the Apostle Paul is quoting from and referencing some Old Testament passages throughout. Verse 5 begins with Moses and righteousness through the Law. In the preceding chapters of Romans, St. Paul has made it very clear that no one can be justified, have their sins forgiven, through the Law. Because we are all sinners, we, “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Try as we may, we can’t be perfect, which is God’s standard. We can’t atone for our sins by anything that we do. Put in laymen’s terms these first few verses are saying “Do you think you can go up to heaven and find Jesus yourself?”, “Do you think you can somehow cause Jesus to rise from the dead?” Of course not, only God can raise Himself from the dead. We don’t go up to heaven and find Jesus, He came down and found us and saves us. If we understand this, we are understanding correct as verse 6 said, *“the righteousness of faith speaks in this way.”* These verses (and what has already been established earlier in Romans) blow the idea that we can somehow be good enough to become a Christian or that it is even a combination of faith and works for salvation out of the water. We can’t do it. The alternative, the only way, is true faith, true trust in Jesus and His work. Verse 8 cites from Deuteronomy 30:14, *“The word is near you in your mouth, and in your heart.”*

Rather than a complicated formula or prescribed set of rituals, Paul says the following about how one is saved. Verses 9-10, *“that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”* That’s it? Yes, that’s it. It sounds so simple. Perhaps thinking it is too simple has caused so many to want to add to this. Yes, we have certain things, “rituals,” if you will that we practice as

Christians like fasting during Lent and singing hymns. Yes, we are to do good works as God's people. But none of that saves. None of that earns forgiveness of sins. It is only God who forgives sins eternally. It is only Jesus who has made atonement for our sins and defeated death itself. It is only the Holy Spirit that creates saving faith. It is that simple, yet that profound.

So profound and unbelievable to fallen human beings that we can't even believe and make confession without God working. Because some might object and say, "You see, I do need to *do* something. It says that I need to believe and speak it out loud." But you must understand that this cannot even be done without the work of God. 1 Corinthians 12:3 says that one can only confess Jesus as Lord by the work of the Holy Spirit. Becoming a Christian is by through Word and Sacrament. Because even the Sacraments of Baptism and of the Altar are not holy and effective without the Word, without faith. We can't just do "drive by shootings" with squirt guns to baptize people. We can't just tell people on the street to eat a piece of bread and drink a little wine. The Word of God must be attached to these visible elements. It is the Word that has the power. And when faith is created in our hearts, we cannot help but to speak it out loud. If you believe something in your heart, you will tell others about it. Notice that in verse 9 the speaking comes first and then the believing in the heart and in verse 10 the believing in the heart comes first and then the speaking. Why is this? Because they are two sides of the same coin. They go hand in hand. To make a true confession of faith verbally, one must have faith in their hearts. If one has faith in heart, they will speak it out loud.

And this text is wonderful, so freeing, so assuring. Drawing from Psalm 25:3 and Isaiah 28:19 St. Paul tells us, "*Whoever believes on Him will not be put to*

shame.” Verse 12 makes clear that this good news is for all people, Jew and Greek (gentile). All are sinners, but Jesus died for all. Verse 13 quotes from Joel 2:32 telling us that the words of that prophet are fulfilled, *“For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”* Did you get that? Everyone. Whosever. When one calls to God in repentance, He hears them. He is willing and able to save. Thanks be to God!

Then there is a strong call to us to share this good news. Feet, even more so in the Biblical times, were dirty and smelly. But if those feet bring the Gospel, they are called “beautiful.” People must hear the Word to be saved. They need to hear about Jesus. This is our call, our mission, to “bring glad tidings of good things.” Yes, all people are sinners. And all sin condemns us before a Holy God. But God has made the way of peace between God and mankind. And His name is Jesus, the Word made flesh. The Word of faith has come near us. He has done all the work. Every bit of it. His suffering and bloody death were the perfect appeasement of the wrath of God. The sin debt has been paid. We *get* to announce this glorious news of redemption, of being bought back, to the world. We can’t earn it, we can’t pay for it. But Jesus has. By grace it ours. The love of God demonstrated to us.

We are to receive this gift of God in faith. In Acts 16 the Philippian Jailer asked Paul and Silas, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved”*. Their answer was simple and direct, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” If there is anything for us to do, it is to not resist the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing this gift. We can’t intellectually or by force of will find God or believe in Him. It is all the work of God. We simply humble ourselves, bowing before our king and maker. And when we call upon Him, He answers. He gives us adoption into His

family, citizenship in His kingdom. This is how we become a Christian. We don't resist the work of God, but simply receive His Word. God has clearly given us the answer in our text today. And our reading concluded with a verse whose importance cannot be overstated, *"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God."*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.