

"I Believe..."
May 26, 2019
St. Paul's UCC Church
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Romans 10:5-13

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?

"The word is near you,

on your lips and in your heart"

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because 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.

For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

When I was thirteen years old, I went on a week-long summer mission trip to Mexico with my church youth group. During the day, we worked hard – painting and scrubbing and fixing up an old school building there in that impoverished community. During the evening, we prayed hard – worshipping and praying and singing our hearts out to God and to Jesus, the same God and Jesus who had called us to this very important work to begin with.

Our last night's worship service was especially intense. It included the usual praying, singing, and preaching, but there was something else that night, an additional element in the worship service: an altar call. The preacher was really hittin' it out of the park with his sermon – it was all about how much Jesus loved us and how Jesus died for us, each one of us – and right at the climax, he implored us, "Do you really believe in Jesus' promises? Can you say yes to him? Can you accept his salvation? If you want to make it real, come on forward, and accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior! Believe! And be saved!"

I think about half of the group went forward. And I found myself in a bind. I did want to believe Jesus' promises. I did want to accept his salvation. But... hadn't I already done that? Wasn't that why I was on this mission trip in the first place? I watched as most of my friends started walking towards the front of the room. I didn't know what to do. I began to panic. Was this it? If I didn't go forward, did that mean I didn't want to be saved? But wasn't I already saved? But... what if I wasn't saved? Yes, I believed in Jesus and in his salvation, but what if I didn't believe *enough*? Should I go forward just in case? I turned to my friend Mary Frances, who was sitting right next to me, clearly about to get up. "*Should I go too?*" I mouthed to her. She looked at me blankly, and shrugged. She had her own salvation to worry about.

So... how *do* I know? How do I know that I'm really right with God? How do I know if I'm saved? "...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." That's what our reading

from Romans says: Only believe, and you will be saved. But what does that really mean? What does it mean... to believe?

In this passage from Romans, Paul argues against what he calls the “righteousness of the law,” which is the righteousness we think we’ll get from *doing* things. In Paul’s day, as in ours, there are lots of people who believe that if they lead reasonably decent lives, well, in the end God will reckon the good they have done against the bad they have done, and it will come out even. I know lots of people like this – you probably do, too – folks who live their entire religious life on the assumption that God is always keeping score. If I can just make a D minus or above in the examination of life, if the good outweighs the bad, God will throw open heaven’s gate and invite me into paradise.

But the Apostle Paul doesn’t buy it. He rejects this idea that doing enough good things will get us saved (which is often talked about as “works righteousness”). For one thing, I can never live a life righteous enough or holy enough or good enough for God. God is too holy, and, try as I might, I simply am not. But that’s not the only reason Paul rejects works righteousness. He also rejects it because he also knows that works righteousness can quickly become *self*-righteousness. If salvation becomes something that I do, then soon enough, I will start comparing myself to others. Soon enough, salvation is something that I think I can do *better* than other people. If salvation is something that I earn, it’s also something about which I can feel smug.

Well, Paul will have no part in this. Instead, he insists, again and again: *salvation is a gift*. It is never earned. It is always God’s to give, never mine to deserve. My part is simply to *receive* the gift of God in Jesus Christ, to *receive* the righteousness I could never earn for myself.

When I was younger, I thought of faith as something that I had to *do*, and then despaired because I never seemed able to *do* enough of it. Thus my dilemma at the altar that last night of my mission trip.

But Paul would no doubt shake his head and sigh. When I see my *own* belief as the thing that qualifies me for heaven, I do not believe in the Gospel. I simply believe... in belief.

Maybe “belief” is a word that has too much baggage attached to it. Let me suggest a new word, a word much closer to Paul’s idea: trust. The Greek word *pistis*, translated as “belief” in most English Bibles, can also mean “trust.” Now these two words may sound pretty similar, but there is in fact a world of difference between them – between belief and trust. You may believe that I am a decent enough driver, but would you trust me with your car keys?

When I wonder, or obsess, on whether I *believe enough*, I am hindered from ever really entering into the Christian life. If I think I have to believe in order to be saved, I will probably squander my entire life wondering if I’m there yet. I will gaze so intently into my own navel, anxiously watching for signs of belief, that I will never look up to see God, or the neighbor whom God calls me to love. Belief, for its own sake, is a dead end.

But trust... trust is different. Trust involves all of me. Trust means investment, risk. I stake my whole life on that in which I trust. So, I may believe in parachutes. I may know all about their operation, may understand the math behind it. I may have a Ph.D. in parachutes, but I have not trusted in one until I jump out of a plane.

Trust jumps out of the plane. Trust accepts the fact that *God* takes care of my salvation and then acts accordingly. Christ died for me. I am marked by my baptism, and I belong to him. Salvation is not my problem to worry about. Instead, I’m simply asked to trust – not in myself, not in my own ability to believe hard enough – but to trust in Jesus Christ. I am to trust that he has already done everything that had to be done for my salvation. I am to trust that my sins are forgiven. I am to trust that God welcomes me with open arms.

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It may sound simple enough. But finding trusting like this very difficult to actually put into practice. So... how do I do it? How do I trust?

For starters, maybe I should get rid of all my "I" and "me" language, and starting talking about "we" and "us."

How do I trust? Not by myself. Not by my own power.

God has not left me – left you – God has not left us alone. God has given us the Holy Spirit... and God has given us the church. God has given us each other. We gather together week after week – we worship, we pray, we sing, we share our joys and our sorrows – we do this to listen together for the still, small voice of God; and together, we find strength to keep on trusting... at least until the next week, when we do it all again.

We do it together. We believe together. We trust together.

The altar calls are optional.

Thanks be to God.