

## **Lenten Sermons: "The Promises of Easter"**

### **Week One: "The Promise of Inclusion"**

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#### **Romans 10:6-13**

<sup>6</sup>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) <sup>7</sup>or "Who will descend into the abyss?" ' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup>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); <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. <sup>11</sup>The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Lent begins this week and we Presbyterians are a little skittish about getting fully involved in it. I mean we like the color purple and we like the cool rituals of Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and maybe a little foot washing but we aren't always so sure about these messages of repentance and sin and spiritual discipline and all. Well, that's not true, we Presbyterians idolize the Prayer of Confession (which by the way is included in our order of worship and will continue throughout Lent) but we quickly rush to that Assurance of Forgiveness to make it all better. One paragraph of confession and then a quick "it'll be ok" But what if we really dealt with the root of things for awhile and maybe instead of dusting the house of our lives each week as we are accustomed to doing, we really did some spring cleaning of our spirits for a few weeks. Lent is a spiritual time for some personal spring cleaning. I fear that it is easy to become hoarders of what ails us never looking to start anew.

I think the stereotype of this season is giving up something, like chocolate, so we can feel the weight of Jesus' cross for Lent then at Easter rush out and experience the resurrection through a sugar coma! As fun as that sounds, it kind of misses the point. The point is not to stack one more burden on but to free you up. We give up something to make room for something better. Maybe something spiritual or at least something healthier.

We Christians spend, at most, about two hours nurturing our spiritual sides. For Lent, what if we gave up that half hour commute one day a week, took the bus, and spent that time reading the paper and considering how Jesus might wish us to respond prayerfully, hopefully to each one crisis we see. What if we made space for dinner table community with our families or neighbors for these 6 weeks. Or, what if we spent one lunch hour per week reading to a child, catching up with widowed or shut in friends, family or church members? And of course there are the near and dear ministries of this church such as the food pantry we could volunteer with. Now don't do them because someone begged you to fill a slot out of some duty. (Don't hate me session). Do something that will bring you joy and give you rest for your spirit. Just for 6 weeks. We can do anything for 6 weeks.

Sound like another time commitment? Well, make it manageable by picking up the phone for a 5 minute phone call that can change some of our loneliest people's world. Call your mom, your son, your grandparent, your aunt. That involves just giving up Angry Birds or Facebook for 5 minutes. It's a call while standing in line at the grocery store. You get the picture. This is not about being a spiritual superhero. This is about taking a baby step in a direction of loving our neighbor and loving our God a little more this year. What might you do this Lent to reorient your life into the likeness of the character of Jesus? It isn't about quantity, it's about quality.

You probably heard today's passage and said "but it sounds fairly exclusive." And I admit it gets used that way which is unfortunately. So let's rediscover this text. This is one of those times in scripture when a little bit of understanding about the setting really helps us and actually helps us see an unexpected message of the promise of inclusion.

But being a Christian in the U.S. in 2013 is not the same as being one in first century Rome. I remember the story told by a Jewish rabbi friend who would say "we Jews will stay at home and enjoy a meal around our family table or invite friends, or members of our religious community together to celebrate our festivals. It is a time to cherish our heritage, to shut out the dominant culture that ignores the Jewish story. So when we attempt to go to the movies on Christmas day, we

are often perplexed by the long lines. At first we got excited that perhaps there were so many more Jewish people in town than we thought! Then we realized that Christians don't stay at home with their families and spend time with their community of faith."

We don't have to. We live in a Christian dominant culture. Our culture is our religious community. We see no reason to gather in our Christian communities to reinforce our identity because it is all around us. And that makes things challenging.

Some say we live in New Testaments times in regard to the Christian faith but that trivializes those who have come before. Someone saying Happy Holidays is in no way equivalent to sacrificing Christians to the lions. Not even close. We still live in privileged times as Christians in the United States. It is changing but it is still very "normal" to be Christian, at least in more places than not. Now to be a Christian that is serious about the promise of inclusion, is still countercultural. I know you have paid a price for it and I have as well. The fact that we pay prices for these things is not a sign that they are wrong but, actually, a sign that we are living where the early church lived...in the gaps.

It wasn't "normal" to be an inclusive Christian at the time this was written. Romans were persecuting Christians or at least on the verge of doing so when this was written. The early Christians were more akin to modern groups like Occupy, or with my more Republican friends I might make the analogy of the Tea Party. A subset, rebel rousers. They were saying that they were claiming a new paradigm and overturning the powers that be. Nobody in the "center" of culture likes that kind of talk very much.

Why don't people like what they were saying? Well, they were saying some scandalous things in this passage:

- 1) Faith was accessible to all, not just the powerful and the rich, the clergy, or the politicians. The first verse quotes Deuteronomy and basically speaks of how the basis of their faith is not held by some dogma, some law, some authority somewhere...it is written on their hearts and thus is the closest it can ever be. It is within their hearts. This is a statement expressing allegiance to the early synagogue as opposed to the Roman Caesar worship.
- 2) They boldly claimed that Caesar did not have a monopoly on people's life and worth. Kurios Caesar or "Caesar is Lord" is how you were expected to express your subservience to Caesar. Kurios Jesus is a bit of an "occupy"

way of turning the dominant culture upside down and saying “Look, Caesar, you don’t own me. I am my own person and if someone is going to “Lord” over me, it is the most humble of servants and martyrs of Rome, Jesus Christ. I follow him, not someone with an army or sword. I am not afraid. I follow the inclusive Jesus.

They have now alienated religious authorities and the empire.

- 3) As an oppressed minority it was tempting as early Christian to remain silent or to go along to get along. It was scary to speak up. To be expressing the promise of inclusive had consequences. But Paul is insisting that followers of Jesus claim their inclusive identity and be heard. It is one of the most dramatic calls to come out of the closet that we see. This is not a call to a cheap advertising campaign. It is liberation!
- 4) Finally it says as Christians we do not let things divide us. For them it was Jews and Christians...for us it might be Republican or Democrats. It might be racial or immigrant vs. citizen. No! We are one in Christ. Period.
- 5) “Everyone who calls upon Jesus is saved” echoes the prophet Joel and reminds everyone that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and that it is a law of inclusion. Jesus stands out in front liberating and opening the way for everyone. Everyone. Everyone.

I love the joke that when someone asks when you were saved, you respond with 2,000 years ago. We don’t like this language of being saved but remember. It isn’t about some place far away or some elitism. Karl Barth who is championed by some of the most conservative voices in our denomination said, he thought when Jesus died on the cross it was for everyone without qualification. Abolishing hell once and for all. Period. Being saved isn’t about geography, it is about quality of life. Our English word salvation is connected to the root salvo when is similar to our word salve. It is about healing. If you follow Jesus, we aren’t talking rules, we are talking Jesus character. If we do this, the things that plague us can be healed. Follow in his manner. Walk in his steps. Watch as things get better.

So Lent is about turning from what divides us, abandoning the need for power and security, and embracing the Jesus qualities of love of God and neighbor that leaves no one behind. Jesus goes on this journey toward Jerusalem and ultimately to the cross to embrace all people (male, female, Jew or Greek, American or North Korean, Republican or Democrat, Gay or Straight, Rich or Poor, Citizen or Immigrant, physically privileged or

physically challenged, young or old, Hindu or Muslim, imprisoned or free) and walk with them in a self-discovery of a more healing way.

Won't you join Jesus in this radically inclusive journey this Lent? Won't you turn the page toward something new? Won't you hear the promise and walk toward new life? Be challenged this Lent to turn the page, be assured by the promise of Easter, and walk toward a new day.