



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

www.mzluth.org

February 7, 2010
5th Sunday after Epiphany
Romans 10:13-17
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Judges 13:6-24
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 85
Second Lesson: Romans 10:13-17
Gospel: Luke 5:1-11

Lord, who has believed your message?

I remember reading a story awhile back that really illustrates the nature of faith. I don't remember the guy's name though, so for the sake of brevity, I'm going to call him "The Great Fred." The Great Fred was a tightrope walker renowned for his ability to walk a tightrope. He had strung a tightrope across waterfalls. He asked the crowd that had gathered for his performance, "Do you believe I can walk across this tightrope?" They all said, "Sure, I guess. That's your name, The Great Fred, the tightrope walker." So he walks there and he walks back. They cheer and applaud because that was pretty neat. He says to them, "Do you believe I can ride this unicycle across this tightrope?" They say, "Yeah, I guess so." So he does it. Now they are going kind of wild because it's kind of neat to see a guy ride a unicycle over a tightrope with the falls beneath him. You could see blood if things go bad, so this is pretty exciting now.

Finally The Great Fred says to the crowd that is kind of whipped up in a fury, "Do you believe I could carry someone on my back across this tightrope on the unicycle?" They all say, "You bet! You're The Great Fred! You can do anything with a tightrope!" He says, "Okay, who wants to volunteer?" How many people do you think really believed then? No one volunteered. Their lips said, "We believe! We believe!" But their actions said, "Get out of town Fred."

It kind of takes you back to the quote from Isaiah that Paul used, right? Isaiah said, "Lord, who has believed our message? The preacher preached the message and the people say, 'we believe, we believe,' but their actions are often far from you, Lord. Lord, who has believed your message?"

This morning as we've heard God's call to be fishers of men, and we hear in what I just read to you what has often been called the "golden chain of missions," each thing builds on another link in the chain and if one link is broken or not carrying out its work, then the Gospel is not going to be spread. We hear our Lord teaching us something about who we are and who we are in carrying out this wonderful task he has given us. So we kind of have to ask ourselves today, "Lord, do we believe your message? Deep down, do we believe your message about faith itself and where it comes from? Do we believe your message in what you've told us to be doing?" These are pretty good questions.

In this section of Paul's letter to the Romans, he had been talking about how he was really hurt that his people, the Jews, that many had not believed in Jesus. He said they

were zealous for God earlier, before this in the chapter, but their zeal is misplaced. They don't see Jesus as the fulfillment of all the promises, and that's just a big problem. He talks about how his heart went out because they didn't believe. His great desire was that they would believe. He also points out the truth that since they had rejected that truth, that God had always said all along that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, "everyone" would include Gentiles as well.

So he is showing biblically from the Old Testament how this was always God's plan, that the Gentiles would come into the family of believers. But it really pained him that they didn't believe. He says that faith comes from hearing the message. The message was proclaimed to them. The message of the Savior to come, that was proclaimed to them. Faith comes from hearing the message and that message is heard through the word of Christ, which could either mean the word about Christ or the word that comes from Christ. In either case, it's the Good News. The message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone came from Christ, and it is about Christ.

Faith and salvation is not something that comes from us. It comes from the message itself. The power to lead you and me to believe does not live within us. It can't. You and I by nature are sinful. We're not just a little sinful. We're not just kind of sinful. We're not just sort of a little bit sinful. We're sinful through and through so that God describes us spiritually as being dead in our transgressions and sins even while we are inhaling and exhaling. Spiritually we are dead.

That means that if we are spiritually dead, we can't have faith start with us. It has to start with God. He has to resurrect us spiritually. He has to give us spiritual life because we have none ever since the fall into sin. You and I, as Christians, we understand that our sin separates us from God. We understand all that, but do we truly believe this at times? Or do we at times, just because of who we are as sinful human beings who can't grasp a holy God whose ways and thoughts are so much beyond ours, do we still at times slip into trying to give ourselves a little bit of credit for coming to faith? Did you ever hear anyone say, "All you have to do is repent and then you will be forgiven;" as though my repentance causes my forgiveness. It doesn't cause my forgiveness, but we can start thinking that way. My forgiveness was secured long before anything I would say or do. But since God has worked faith in my heart and he has done the work, now I want to repent when I have sinned. I want to say, "Lord, I've screwed up again. I don't know how you can keep putting up with such a filthy wretch as I am, but I'm so glad that you do." That's not my work. That's God working that in me. But we want to give ourselves the credit.

Or we say to someone, "All you have to do is believe that Jesus is your Savior." That's like telling a dead dog, "All you have to do is get the tennis ball. It's right in front of your nose. Can't you get it?" It's not going to happen. We can't do the believing. It has to be God's gift.

You and I understand that, true, but we still talk that way at times, don't we? So do we really get it? Do we really look to God for all of our source of our confidence and our

comfort and our strength that we are forgiven children of God, or do we at times slip into thinking, "There's no such thing as a free lunch. I better do good and be good or else God won't love me."

We are sinners. There will be times when the world around us will tempt us to do it or Satan will tempt us to do it, and we need to be on our guard against it because we need to rely completely and absolutely on God alone.

Here is the great truth. We live in a sinful world. Being part of a sinful world means that we aren't always going to have the strength that we think we have now. We aren't always going to have the abilities that we have now. And if we are relying on our own self for our salvation or the confidence of our salvation, what are we going to do when we or a loved one can't do anything anymore, can't even open their eyes or speak to us or see us?

Here's our confidence. Faith comes from hearing the message. The message works faith in that heart. And the Holy Spirit keeps us in that faith through Word and Sacrament until the end. That's God's doing. Our job is to make sure we spend some time in the Word and Sacrament so God can strengthen that faith he has so graciously given to us. It's a joy to get to know your God better. Try it. You'll like it.

The other truth then is as we get to know God better; we have to ask ourselves, "Do we believe the message?" Do we believe the message that he has given us in this golden chain of missions? If you think of this as a golden chain of missions, did you hear, did you listen, did you figure out which link you are? You are in there. In there he said, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," right? "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" So which link are you?

I'm assuming you believe that Jesus is your Lord and Savior and you call on him, which means you exercise your faith in him. Have you been sent? Could that be the link that you are? Are you the one that has been sent to preach so that others can hear so that when they hear the message, that message can work faith in their hearts? Didn't the good Lord say, "Always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that you have"? Wouldn't that be him sending us? That's not just somebody else's job. That's every Christian's job. You are the link in the chain. You've been called. Do you believe that?

Do you truly believe that God has called you to be his voice, to reach out to those that are going to hell, grab them so that his Spirit can use that Gospel to lift them out of hell and on the road to heaven? Do you believe that? Really?

I think we all believe we have a role in nurturing those who already believe. God certainly has called us to do that also, but if you want to take an imaginary scale and put all the volunteer hours in our congregation that go into ministering to the found and on

the other side of it put that link of the chain, you've been sent to preach the good news to those that don't yet believe; which way is the scale tipping? How are we doing as a congregation and as individual Christians in preaching the Gospel to those who are going to hell for an eternity?

Do we think that is someone else's job? "That's why we have a pastor. That's why we have an Outreach Committee, so they can go talk to those people, so we don't have to. We have the times posted on our sign out front. If those unbelievers want to come in and hear, they can come in and hear. I'm not stopping them. Right, unbelievers really want to come and sit on a hardwood pew, oh it has cushions now, big deal, it's still a hardwood pew, and they want to sit and listen to some guy up there that talks loud. That's their 'to do' list on a Sunday morning." Half of you probably don't even want to be doing that right now, right? You're thinking "When is he going to shut up? I'm getting hungry."

You can't expect an unbeliever to produce the fruits of faith because worshipping God is a fruit of faith, right? They have to know why. They have to have the Spirit work that faith in their hearts. Then they will do the works of service like we do, to worship our God because we love him, and to sit on pews that are now padded so that we have this blessing that God brings into our lives.

This is what God has called us to do. And if you are honest, at least I know if I'm honest with myself, I don't always do it. I don't always seize every opportunity that God has given me. I have to believe that you don't seize every opportunity God has given you to be that link in the chain, to let your light shine. We might say, "We're ready Lord." But sometimes we say, "Lord, here am I. Send him." Or "Here am I. Why don't you go because I don't want to."

When we do that, we have failed our God. God would say that is a sin. We can make all the excuses we want in the world, but the answer to sin is not excuses. The answer to sin remains only Jesus Christ.

This is the amazing thing about our God. He loves us and forgives us even though we at times have failed him, even though we at times have loved ourselves more than we have loved him and sharing his message. His love remains absolutely unflinching for us.

When we recognize this glorious truth, that God loves us because he is love, and that God forgives us because that is who he is, and that his Spirit still lives in our hearts even though we have failed him, then we find joy in the forgiveness of sins and we find the desire to not just say, "I believe, I believe," but to climb up onto the Spirit's back as he takes us across what seems like a tightrope over waterfalls as we put ourselves on the line to share the glorious Gospel message that even though we are sinners, God loved us enough to live and die in our place and he took away all of our sins and he's opened the gates to heaven for us. He does all the work. We just get all the blessings.

That's a great message to share!