

Call to Faith: What Shall We Do?©

Luke 4:1-13; Romans 10:8b-17

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Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

1st Sunday in Lent

Here we go again! This 40 day, plus Sundays, journey we take together every year, as we follow the Lenten path toward the cross and finally, the joyful celebration of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

As we begin our Lenten Bible Study on Simon Peter, we will be focusing on what it means to be a disciple – an ordinary, flawed, human – as we are and as Peter was as well.

Each year, the first Sunday in Lent begins with the temptations of Jesus. Lent is about knowing Jesus better and reflecting on where we fall short in our life with him. Lent is about repenting of our turning away from him, of our getting off the path. It is about making a conscious effort to turn back again and walk with him. Lent is a time for renewing and strengthening our faith.

The account of Jesus going into the wilderness for forty days where he fasted and prayed and then was tempted, yet as vulnerable as he was, still resisted giving in, is to be our model for resisting temptation as well.

“Yes,” you might be thinking, “but Jesus was the Son of God. Of course, he was able to resist temptation.”

And yes, he was the Son of God, but he came here as a human. As we are. He was divine, yet he was fully human, the scriptures tell us. The point is we *could* resist temptation as the fully human Jesus did. But, of course, not one human ever has been without sin. Except that one - Jesus.

Paul says, in Romans 6:23 *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Scripture tells us that sin separates us from God, but Jesus, who was sinless, took all the sins of the world upon himself and suffered that death for all of us. Through his death on the cross we have been offered grace and forgiveness for our sins, and reconciliation with God.

We so often quote those familiar words of Jesus we find in John 3:16 ¹⁶*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

And verse 17 goes on to say, ¹⁷*For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”*

God loved the world so much he gave us a way of being saved from sin and death. His very own sinless son, Jesus. The very name of Jesus means “one who saves.”

But there is a part of that verse that, for Christians, is very important. It is the part that says *“whoever believes in him ...”*

Christians have stood firm, from the time of the resurrection, on the belief that we must put our faith in Jesus, believe he is the son of God who gave us salvation through the cross and who rose from the dead, providing eternal life for all who believe in him.

Paul says in the Romans text today *“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.”*

These are the texts from the common lectionary for the First Sunday in Lent. How appropriate it is that we are celebrating the sacrament of baptism today and that Nicole will confess with her lips that she believes, and that she and Jordan will also make the same confession for their child, until Emery is old enough to confirm those baptismal vows.

We ask, “do you turn from the ways of sin and evil in the world and turn to Jesus Christ?” And we ask, “who is your Lord and Savior,” and they answer “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.”

Confessing with your lips what we you believe in your heart.

Paul writes: ¹⁰*For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.*

And what does that word “*justified*” mean? I’ve heard it described as meaning “just as if I never sinned.” *Justified.*

Because with Jesus our sins are covered in God’s sight. That is grace. We did nothing to earn our forgiveness; nothing to gain salvation from our sins. Jesus did it all for us out of love. His sacrifice, our gain. It is a free gift to us. We are just called to believe in our hearts and to confess with our lips that he is our Savior.

There are a lot of religions that claim that’s not true. And many atheists who say its all a fairy tale. But I believe in a holy book that has lasted all these years with so much inspiration given by the Holy Spirit that illumines the truth for us who are open to receiving it. And I believe if you have the smallest amount of faith, that is the Spirit of God convicting you and convincing you that it is true.

Paul says *‘The word is near you, it’s on your lips and in your heart.’*

It’s one important reason for studying the Word, the Bible, because when we are faithful to read the Word of God asking for understanding, God is faithful to illumine the truth and meaning for us all. The Word is near us and he puts in our hearts, if we are open.

But there are some other very important things Paul has to say in this letter to the church in Rome that I think we should take seriously. I actually have come to believe that the very fact that we have let it slip in many of our mainline churches, just might be a big factor in our decline.

Listen again to these words of Paul:

“14 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? ¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?”

When did we quit putting an emphasis on the main thing Jesus told us to do – to go out and share the good news, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

We’re good at saying we share the love of God by doing good deeds for people – you know that saying of St. Francis, one of that I love – “Preach Jesus, and if all else fails, use words.”

But think about it. There are many organizations that do wonderful things for people – for the sake of caring about humanity – but not necessarily for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I’ve started wondering – how will they know the difference if we don’t actually tell them?

Our greatest desire as a disciple probably should be to care about others knowing the love of God and the salvation given to us at a great cost by Jesus our Savior. That is, if we really believe it ourselves.

But because we don’t know how to do it anymore, we are timid. And perhaps some of us are even a little confused about what we do actually believe.

But, of course, there are ways to learn how to share the wonderful Good News with others in a way that is welcoming and loving and convincing. And I’m convinced that needs to be an important focus for the church of the future, if we are going to continue being strong.

In the past, we sent missionaries to other parts of the world to share the gospel with unbelievers. Today, the fastest growing churches are in those countries and they are strong.

There is a great mission field though, full of unbelievers today and that is now right here in our country. When I went to the Upper Room Ministries to work in 2001 they said then that America is now a “post-Christian country.” I refused to believe it at the time. But it is now known to be even more true.

It’s hard for us to grasp that because most of us have been Christians all of, or at least much of our lives and most of the people we are friends with are Christians.

And the largest protestant denomination in our country is the one that still focuses on evangelism – the Southern Baptist Church. Their greatest focus is on bringing people to Christ.

And the other fastest growing churches in our country are those like the one down the street – the non-traditional, non-denominational churches that we feel competition from and are baffled at how many people they have. We say we don’t want to be like them. We like tradition. But the main thing about them is that they focus on Seekers – a name that is used for people who have never gone to church and would never understand our tradition or people who have had a sour experience in the mainline church. And they are focusing on the Good News of salvation.

We say they have all the attractions – praise bands, a big gym – a coffee house. And they do but I don't think those things would last if they weren't reaching peoples hearts.

There are so many who really do not know the wonderful love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ – the one whom we get our name from – *Christian*.

If our hearts are not full of longing and great desire for others to know him as we do then we should be praying for that conviction, and to learn how to do it.

As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

May we today, in hearing this Word that is close to us, receive it in our hearts and once again, confess with our lips, along with those who are being baptized, that Jesus is Lord.

And may the Holy Spirit renew us and fill us with joy that is running over, with excitement to share with others the joy of the Lord, and may he compel us to learn how to share that Good News of salvation and eternal life.

Amen. May it be so.

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