

The Gospel
Ex. 12:1-14, Ps. 119:33-40, Ro. 13:8-14, Mt. 18:15-20
September 4, 2011

I.

Labor Day traditionally is the symbolic end of summer. Many of us anticipate the arrival of college and professional football. Others, at least in more northern climates, put their summer clothes away and break out the fall wardrobe.

But Labor Day does not just mark a transition from one season to another. It also has meaning in the history of our nation. It's when we recognize the economic and social achievements of hard working men and women at the heart of our free enterprise system. It's when we remember some basic and fundamental parts of our common life.

Today's readings call us to do the same in a religious sense. They also remind us of basic and foundational principles. The Old Testament reading from Exodus tells the history of the Passover. The Psalm reflects obedience to God's will. In Romans St. Paul called the church to a holy life. And in the Gospel Jesus continued to prepare his disciples to go into the world.

Because today brings us to some basics, both on the calendar and in the Bible, I would like to use this notion as a point of departure to talk about the most basic of all the basics. And because it is so basic we sometimes gloss over it, assuming everyone already understands it, and we detour down other theological pathways.

II.

If anyone asked me to summarize, in the fewest possible words, the message of the Bible, I would say that the message is Jesus Christ. Certainly the Bible speaks of the history of Israel, and describes principles of ethical and moral behavior. Those are important, but they also are only part of the picture. The Bible primarily is a story of humanity's redemption in Jesus Christ.

And we might think we learned that years ago, and don't need to spend much time on such familiar territory. As educated contemporary Christians, we might prefer to hear nuanced explanations of complex biblical passages, or want to be entertained with engaging stories of spiritual experiences that make the Bible relevant now.

Those are good things. I have done both right here at this pulpit. But we also are called to remember the central core of our faith, which is the message of salvation without which the Bible would be just another book. It would be a fruitless experience to read the Bible and miss the promised hope of salvation. That's why the church encourages it to be preached.

And that message is grounded in our Lord and Savior. It is a promise of life, and peace, and eternity, and heaven. It is a promise upon which we can rely because, as the Book of Hebrews tells us, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8).

Yesterday was when Jesus Christ was on earth, and atoned for our sins. Today he is in heaven to help us with our problems, lift our burdens, wipe our tears, and bring a joy that can come only from him. And, of course, tomorrow is that future time when he returns to establish his kingdom as King of kings and Lord of lords. The promise of salvation underlies all three eras.

All we have to do today is accept Jesus Christ in those ways. Ask him to come into your life. And as I have said before, if you have already done it, do it again. If you already have put your faith in Jesus Christ, then you know that everything has changed. You know that your life has been transformed. You have a sense of peace that comes from faith. All is well with your soul.

And if you still are searching for that defining moment, be assured it will come if you want it to come. For some people the moment bursts upon them like a sudden rainstorm, soaking them immediately. For others, it can unfold more gradually, and be like standing in a slow drizzle. But if you stand there long enough, you get just as wet. Either way, Jesus comes to rule your life.

III.

And as we recall that defining moment, or as we continue to move toward that time when the moment comes upon us, we encounter three simple truths taught in the Bible. Because we are focusing on Jesus Christ as the basic message of the Bible, we might call these mini-basics.

The first is the reality that our relationship with God has been broken and must be fixed. Second, Jesus offers the only way to do that. And third, it cannot be fixed without faith. Let's consider each of them.

We might start with the belief we are basically good people. But that is our own self-interested opinion; we don't speak for God. God, who truly is holy and perfect, sees us differently. The Book of Romans says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). First John tells us, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8).

Long ago humanity chose its path rather than God's path. As a result, we are broken and we have broken God's heart with our actions and intentions. God wants to see us as he created us, not as we are now. But that no longer is possible. Something must be done to restore us to God's good graces.

But we cannot do it ourselves. We don't want to believe it, but we, on our own, are irrevocably and eternally separated from God. No matter what we do to make things right, it is not enough. We can do good deeds, help the community, and work to make the world a better place, but it is not enough. Nonbelievers also can do good deeds. Atheists also can help others.

It takes something nonbelievers and atheists do not have. Only through Jesus Christ can our relationship with God be fixed. And note I did not say our relationship can be restored to its original condition, but it can be fixed. Romans says, "Christ died for the ungodly" (5:6). That's us. Colossians says, "When we were dead in our sins, God made us alive with Christ" (2:13).

Here is an image used by St. Augustine, perhaps the greatest theologian in the Western Church. Imagine an old-fashioned set of scales; the kind with two pans suspended from a balance bar that are level when equal weights are on both sides.

And now think of humanity on one side, weighted down with the burden of our sins. And on the other side imagine all the things we ever have done and ever could do to try to cause God to accept us. We, on our own, can labor mightily to overcome the burden of our disobedience. But the scales are forever out of balance. Our sins are too heavy.

But if we put Jesus Christ on the other side of the scale, everything changes. He brings things into balance. Through Christ our sins are forgiven even though they still exist, and as the Book of Hebrews says, "They are remembered no more" (8:12).

There is a story of a woman who told her priest she actually spoke with Jesus in her dreams. The priest, wanting to support her, said, "The next time you speak to him ask him to tell you my worst sin." Later the woman told the priest she had spoken with Jesus again in a dream, and passed on the question about the priest's sin. Then she said, "Jesus told me he had forgotten."

That is the meaning of God's forgiveness. Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross enables God to forgive and forget. His sacrifice means we can know God's peace now, and be able to stand in

God's presence later. And on that inevitable day when we all must account for our lives, God will look at us but will see Jesus. And in that moment eternal life will be ours.

But it does not come automatically. And it doesn't happen just because we think we are good people or good neighbors. We also are called to a personal response in faith to Jesus. And that response means believing that Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins and offer us salvation. And it means repenting of those sins and undertaking to do the best we can to live holy lives.

And it must be done in faith because it cannot be accomplished merely through logic, or planning, or the force of our will. We can start with our heads, but we must finish with our hearts. Again we go to Romans to learn that if we confess that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved (10:9).

We might believe that with our heads we can make decisions to open ourselves to Jesus by doing things we can control, such as praying, reading the Bible, coming to church, being in Christian fellowship with each other, and helping others in need. That's a start, but there is more.

The active faith we seek goes beyond these objective things, and makes itself known in our hearts. Through the Holy Spirit we receive a gift of life-giving energy that works within us as we accept Christ's saving work on the cross. This leads to an attitude of hope for the future that helps us live with confidence in newness and fullness of life.

As a result, faith in this sense is not something we can create or manufacture through our own efforts other than to respond in our humble acceptance of God's gift of salvation in Christ. But faith will come if we sincerely want it.

IV.

And so we have the basic message of the Bible; salvation through faith in the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is at the center of our spiritual lives, and is the foundation of the church.

There is no alternative, and there is no other way. Some people criticize Christianity for this. They say our beliefs are too exclusive. We should be more tolerant. People should be able to decide what they want to believe without someone else telling them what the Bible says.

I have talked about this before and bemoaned how contemporary society is marginalizing religion. Without going into all of it again I will only mention some of the metaphors I have used to describe how the world creeps into the church. Salad bar spirituality. Consumer Christianity. Tour bus theology. Hopefully those terms are somewhat self-explanatory.

But, at the end of the day, truth is truth and wishful thinking is wishful thinking. We cannot create truth by wishful thinking. And the truth is that our relationship with God has been broken and needs to be fixed. Jesus Christ offers the only way to do that. And it must be done in faith. That's the truth.

I pray that we all share a continuing attitude of inward joy flowing from what God has done in Christ, and has offered to all who believe. It is our Christian hope and does not change because of worldly circumstances. It is the Good News, and it is for now and forever. Amen.