

## ***The Good News***

Romans 10:8-17

August 5, 2012

### **I.**

Many of you participated in our recent course on 40 Days in the Word, and there have been good comments about it. And for those who could not participate, we are working on creating opportunities for all to share parts of this experience in the time ahead.

I believe this course was important in three ways. First, we learned about different approaches to studying the Bible. Second, we organized service projects to help in the community and here at the church. We call them Micah 6:8 projects. Third, we did it all in small groups.

We now want to build on this experience so that everyone can be part of the service projects and the small group structure. And, of course, studying the Bible always remains a priority.

And also, because we are recognizing the end of the 40 Days program today, we will have brief comments after I finish from some of the coordinators and participants about their experience. So this sermon will be shorter so that I don't take away from their time.

In fact, this sermon will be very basic. I want to talk today about the most basic of all basics, which is set forth in our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans.

### **II.**

If anyone asked me to summarize the message of the Bible in one short sentence, I would say that it is God's love for us through Jesus Christ. Certainly the Bible recounts the story of Israel, and sets forth principles of ethical and moral behavior. Those are important, but they are only part of the picture. The Bible primarily is a story of humanity's redemption in Jesus Christ.

This means we always are called to remember this central core of our faith, which is the promise of salvation without which the Bible would be just another history book.

And that promise 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, through the Holy Spirit, he helps us with our problems, lifts our burdens, wipes our tears, and brings 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.

And as we think about Jesus in these ways, we encounter four simple but eternal truths. The first, which underlies it all, is that God loves us and has wonderful plans for our lives. He created us to be in a relationship with him.

The second reality, however, is that our relationship with God has been broken and must be fixed. But we cannot fix it ourselves.

This leads to the third reality, which is that Jesus Christ is the only way to do that. Christ is God's only path to restoring us to be what he intended.

And the fourth and final reality is that it is up to us. We must accept Jesus in that way, as our Savior and our Lord, so that we can know God's enduring and eternal love for us.

### III.

Let's briefly consider these truths. You might have seen a biblical verse posted just outside the doors this morning. It's reprinted in your service bulletins. We also see it on bumper stickers, license plates, coffee mugs, and tee shirts. Sometimes it's just the numbers; 3:16.

Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16)." But that love also is for now, not only in eternity. He sent Jesus into the world so that we might have lives that overflow today in the abundance of a relationship with him (Jn 10:10).

That relationship, however, was distorted before we were ever born, which leads to the second reality. God gave us free will. And long ago humanity chose its path rather than God's path, and rebelled against God. As a result, 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.

And what are we now? We all might start with the belief we are basically good people, and we would be correct if ours was the only opinion that counted. But 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). And so we, on our own, cannot unring the bell.

We, on our own, are irrevocably 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 that alone is insufficient. Nonbelievers also can do good deeds. Well-meaning atheists also can help others.

So something else must be done to restore us to God's good graces. It takes something that nonbelievers and atheists do not have.

This is the third reality. 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 transgressions 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).

And so Jesus' sacrifice for us 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 the content of our lives, God will look at us but will see Jesus, and eternal life will be ours.

But it does not come automatically. It doesn't happen just because we are good people or good neighbors or have good intentions. This is the fourth reality.

We also are called to a personal response of faith in Jesus. This means believing that Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins and offer us salvation. It also means repenting of those sins and undertaking to do the best we can to live holy lives. And in those times when we fail, which inevitably will happen, it means we get back up and try again.

But it must be done in faith, not merely through logic or the force of our will. We might start with our heads, but we must finish with our hearts. Again from Romans we 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).

And the promise of eternal salvation also carries blessings now. Through faith we receive a gift of life-giving energy that works within us as we accept what Christ did on the cross. It 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 is not something we create or manufacture through our own efforts other than to respond in our humble acceptance of God's gift of salvation in Christ. But we will have it if we sincerely want it.

#### **IV.**

So there we have the basic message of the Bible; salvation and peace 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.

And there is no alternative; there is no other way. Some people criticize Christianity for this. They say our beliefs are too exclusive. They say other religions provide the same thing.

But, at the end of the day, it is what it is. We do not control God's design. 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 must 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.*