

A Believer's Heart
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Romans 10:5-15

⁵ Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' ⁶But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸But 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); ⁹because 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. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. ¹¹The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

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

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

²⁸ Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' ²⁹He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'

³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

We take for granted what Paul is saying in the letter to the Romans. Of course, we don't believe that following the ten commandments is what causes us to be saved - it's through our faith in Jesus' act of dying on the cross and God's action in resurrection that we know we are saved. This is not news to us if we have spent any time in a Christian church. But to the Romans, there was not yet such a thing as a Christian church. There were only believers in Christ from all different walks of life, all different origins. The Greeks and any other Gentiles came to the faith without a familiarity of the Jewish laws,

without any formal faith to turn their backs upon. The Jews in Rome, though, well, they believed in Christ - that was not a question. They understood however that there were ways to be righteous and your level of righteousness here on earth earned you quicker or slower access to Gan Eden, or heaven.¹ Following the laws in the book of Leviticus was how to be righteous (check out the twenty-seven chapters and the 613 commandments). There was, and is, nothing inherently wrong with the notion of guiding rules but, as we heard so frequently through Jesus, many were missing the spirit of the law, the encouragement to love God and one another, in an effort to stick to the letter of the law.

Paul was asking the Jews to give up their tight grip on the laws, on their faith in the laws, for faith in Christ and the salvation he offered. They had been taught from a very young age what they should and should not do - to leave behind the security of a list of rules was terrifying so they were trying to find a balance between both faith in the law and faith in Christ. This letter of Paul's was another attempt at reassuring them: "For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" Paul is trying to reassure them with the very faith history they are clinging to; he references the prophet Joel, chapter two, verse 32: "Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Belief is enough, is more than enough, he tries to assure them.

Peter, in our reading from Matthew, actually understands that belief is enough but that affirmation gets missed sometimes when we focus on his near-drowning. When he sees the person he thinks is Jesus coming towards him, he says "if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." If it's really you, you'll be able to prove it, like telling me your favorite color, or my first dog's name, or what I gave you for your birthday last year. He is not challenging Jesus' authority, simply making sure this is his friend. And, if this is his friend and his friend is walking on water, then he trusts his friend will make it possible for him, too. One little language details to know - πίστις - the root word that both Paul and Matthew use repeatedly in our readings today means not only faith but also belief and trust. So Peter trusts Jesus and has faith in him and believes in him when he has confidence that he, too, will be able to walk on water. And his faith in Christ makes his aquatic walking possible. In those moments, he was focused on his trust in Christ and he remained above water. "But when he noticed the strong wind," we read, when he lost focus, when the rest of the world got in his mind, "he became frightened."

Especially as we sit in these pews, we often feel good about our faith, confident in what we can do with it, confident about how we can go out into the world as people with an active faith. And then we get cut off as we are driving home or we think about the project at work that has us preoccupied or we trip over the dog for the fourth time that day and those feelings of empowerment, that focus on the good we are called to do and be, gets lost and forgotten. And we, like Peter, begin to sink. This is where the

¹ <http://www.jewfaq.org/olamhaba.htm>, 6 August 2011

story so often gets misrepresented - the one recounting the story or even the narrator in our own heads zeroes in on Peter beginning to sink and critiques him for losing faith. But wait! Peter does what we so often forget; “beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”

When you get a telemarketing call or feel stressed in a meeting at work or become impatient with your kids, do you cry out, silently or aloud, “Lord, save me!”? It is a rare moment for me when I *don't* allow the distraction to take me away, to drown out God. Forgetting God is far more common than remembering God, especially in trying times of any shape. And yet Peter, experiencing a physical drowning, cries out to Jesus to help him back to the focus that had kept him above the waterline, and in communion with Jesus, before he was distracted. And when Peter cried out, “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.”

I have heard this story so many times and so many times the delivery of the next line has troubled me. It is so easy for us, who are quick to judge and point out the flaws of others and ourselves, to hear Jesus chiding Peter: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” After all, we might say that very thing to someone we know. But the Jesus who was the perfecter of our faith, the Jesus who lived in the spirit of the law, loving God and others, well, I don't think Jesus would have turned on his friend who was just frightened with the prospect of drowning and given him a hard time. “Little” has such a pejorative connotation - in our modern context “little” is hardly positive. Even the synonym “diminutive” brings to mind something lesser. So to be one of little faith is to be less than one of great faith, to our ears. Yet remember an understanding of our mustard seed and leaven from a couple of weeks ago; even the tiniest bit could make a big difference. After all, that little bit of faith Peter had was enough to have him walking on water. Oh, that our faith should be as little as his!

Perhaps in his moment of noticing the wind, he suddenly thought of the improbability of his walking on water. It's the same thought I have when I fly in an airplane - my dad worked for United Airlines and I have flown more times than I can count and yet I am still struck by the improbability that tons of metal and luggage and flesh travels through the air. I cognitively understand the physics of it but there is still something that seems so improbable to me. Admittedly, at times like that, I do think “Lord, save me!” These matters of faith go against all reason. Why is it that we believe? Scorekeeping with laws like the early Jewish Christians makes more sense; staying in the boat in choppy water makes more sense; even drowning rather than walking on water makes more sense. That “making sense” is the stumbling block.

Paul does not speak of one believing with the mind for that is not where belief comes from. Belief comes from the heart. Our minds, though they be limited by our human constraints, can grasp great things, like planes flying and filing taxes and neurosurgery but there are even greater things that can

only be grasped by the heart. Love, grace, the origination of thought, sympathy, faith in things unseen, the compulsion to help one in need when to do so offers us no tangible benefit. I have recently read *Why Faith Matters* by Rabbi David Wolpe and will fully admit that his insights will likely impact my sermons for weeks to come. In part he tackles the dichotomy that is fostered when people pit science against religion, as if one could undo the inherent need for the other.

Our minds are tremendous gifts, tremendous assets to humanity that should not be discounted for they help us in solving tangible mysteries and they reveal mysteries ever-unfolding. We are more than our minds, though. Rabbi Wolpe said in a talk on the book that in each person there is something that cannot be explained by biochemists, something intangible, and transcendent.² I believe this emanates from our hearts, not the organ with atria, but the core of our being, intangible in its own way. This is where belief and imagination and creativity and trust and compassion and devotion and faith come from. This is from where we cry out to God, beyond all reason. Though speaking of religion, I will take the liberty to suppose that what Rabbi Wolpe says can also be applied to faith; he says, with my ad lib, “at its best, [faith] can bring meaning and purpose and peace.”³

Christ’s message to the disciples as he approached the boat could as easily be a message for the Roman Jews. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Romans, take heart, I am the answer; let go of your fear and do not continue seeking salvation in the law. Like them, when we can allow ourselves to trust beyond reason, we can live fully in sync with the belief in our hearts. “For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” If, in our times of distraction and disillusionment, we become like Peter, we remember to believe with our hearts. We cannot help but confess with our mouths that our salvation comes from Christ and so cry out to be saved by the one who has the power to do it, by the one who has already saved us.

Let us pray: Lord, save us from the things that take our focus off of you and your call upon us to love one God and one another. Amen.

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdkJFn353p0>, 6 August 2011.

³ Ibid.