

Sermon Notes for 2/14/16 (Lent 1)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Romans 10:8b-13

Theme: JOYFUL WITNESS IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION

Hymn: LBW 99 (O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days)

The Point: Amidst the challenges and temptations to deny our Lord, we are called to whole-hearted faith and eager testimony to the grace of God in Christ.

Introduction: During the coming weeks, we will be looking at a number of areas of our Christian life and discipleship under the theme “A Faith-Full Minority in a Faith-Denying World.” Surveys have shown that between 2007 and 2014, the Christian share of the US population declined from 78% to 70%. That may not sound like a lot in that context, but that means that in 7 years 25 million fewer US citizens identified themselves as Christian. That still leaves us some 200 million who claim Christian faith. Of course, 120 million of those do not attend worship services even on a monthly basis. During that same period (2007-2014), the percentage of those identifying as “unaffiliated” (the “nones”) grew from 16% to 23%, a 40% increase to over 70 million (almost as many as the Christians who worship regularly). In addition, the percentage of those who say they attend worship weekly has slipped from 39% to 36%. These changes have been noticed especially among the younger population (as we can observe from looking at the average age of this congregation – or just about any other church).

Such statistics could be multiplied, but I don’t want to spend all our time looking at numbers. It is far more critical that we think through some of the opportunities that we have as confessing Christians in a society that in many ways is leaning farther and farther away from our Christian roots. Paul’s words from Romans 10 today help us to come to grips with the realities that we face. Paul was writing to a Christian population in Rome that was a bare sliver of the overall population of that imperial capital. He did not know – could not know! – that within three centuries (a mere handbreadth in terms of human history) Rome itself, from the emperor on down, would embrace Christianity and become the center of the movement of Western Christianity for a millennium and a half. But Paul had a powerful vision for the transforming power of the Good News of Jesus Christ. He gives us good reason to carry on JOYFUL WITNESS IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION. We need his encouragement today also.

Joyful witness flows from a confident faith. Paul puts it this way: “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.” Heart and mouth work in concert. God created them with that in mind. Faith addresses both.

It is a sad and disappointing thing when heart and mouth are out of synch. The mouth that speaks one thing while the heart is set on something else disrupts God’s intentions. We have seen that even in the lives of some of the prominent teachers of the church. We have seen where people claim to confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord even while in their hearts they deny the reality of His resurrection. Paul puts the lie to such dissembling. When the mouth seeks to hide what is truly in the heart, we deny our humanity and our connections to a God who is the truth.

But when heart and mouth are enlisted together in God’s will and mission, a powerful force is unleashed. By the working of the Holy Spirit, the words “Jesus is Lord” find their way onto our lips. We make that confession whenever we speak the three creeds of the Church. It is present in our hymns and liturgies. We practice here in worship what our Lord is training us for out there in the world, namely making confession of our connection with Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

God has claimed us in our baptism, where we were united with the death and resurrection of Jesus. God

claimed Bob Wolf in his baptism, so that we can rejoice and be certain that today Bob lives even though he has died – and that in Jesus he will never see eternal death. His testimony rings in our ears, even if we miss his bodily presence with us. Just so in our lives: Heart and mouth indicate that God has been at work within us, and that His saving power has effect. But if they are just words, if they are not matched with faith in the heart, if those words represent something different from what our heart actually believes, they are worthless words that do no one any good.

When heart and mind are united, even heated opposition and temptation do not change the focus of the joyful witness of God's people. They merely sharpen its focus. Here consider the Lord Jesus Himself. Luke tells us, "He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." Jesus was harassed by the devil, but He stood firm and never gave in to Satan's temptations.

Just as surely as Satan worked on Jesus to convince Him to go against God's will, so surely will that enemy rail against us and put every sort of obstacle in the way of our obedience. We need to remember that our real enemies are not Wall Street or Hollywood or drug runners or Al Qaeda or ISIS or the Republicans or the Democrats. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but (as Paul describes it) "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Satan loves to hide out behind the social norm that the devil is a comic Halloween figure, dressed in red with horns and a pitchfork. Satan is real, whether our neighbors accept the fact or not – and his greatest desire is to devour.

It is even more difficult for us when we realize that many people around us are being duped by Satan, so that he makes use of them to convince us that his way is best. Whereas, in past generations, one could almost certainly count on some solid Christian mentors in the family or one's circle of friends, today that is not so certain. You may have to work hard to find people who will clearly and faithfully unfold the will of God to you, rather than simply parroting the world's line of bull.

But Paul says that we do not need to fetch Christ from some distant dwelling place – whether as high as heaven or as remote as the place of the dead. No, He is not some unattainable guru on a lofty mountain, accessible only to those who hazard the trip up to the peak. Jesus has come from heaven to earth to carry out His work among us. He has lived as we live. He was tempted as we are tempted – but with the proviso that He never yielded to temptation. And in at least one sense, Jesus was tempted far beyond what we have experienced. With us, Satan has not had to work very hard, has he? We often give in willingly to his slightest nod in our direction. With us, he can get by with pop guns and knives. With Jesus, Satan had to pull out the heavy artillery, the tanks and the nuclear bombs. But none of it deterred Jesus from His path.

Kretzmann: "Had the devil succeeded in his design, then the human race would have remained in his power in all eternity. But Christ did not suffer Himself to be led away from the path of duty and obedience which he had entered. . . . During the entire time of Christ's public ministry, but especially during the days of His last great Passion, the devil used every means in his power to overcome the Son of God, who thus was obliged to be on the alert all the time, always ready to thrust and to parry, as occasion offered."

We need to be ready at all times to thrust and to parry, to ward off the schemes of Satan. Some people fall into temptation, but a great many make plans for disaster ahead of time. "Son," ordered a father, "Don't swim in that canal." "OK, Dad," he answered. But that evening he came home carrying a wet bathing suit. "Where have you been?" demanded the father. "Swimming in the canal," answered the boy. "Didn't I tell you not to swim there?" asked the father. "Yes, sir," answered the boy. "Why did you?" he asked. "Well, Dad," he explained, "I had my bathing suit with me and I couldn't resist the temptation." "Why did you take your bathing suit with you?" he questioned. "So I'd be prepared to swim, in case I was tempted," he replied. Too many of us expect to sin and excite sin and give in to its siren call.

The remedy for such dangerous action is found in Romans 13:14, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” “Make no provision for the flesh.” What does that mean for you? Does it mean refusing to go to the party where you know alcohol and drugs are the main attraction? Does it mean saying “No” to the cute married woman who keeps flirting with you? Does it mean putting safeguards on your computers so that youngsters cannot find their way into pornographic sites? Does it mean surrounding yourself with Christian friends and coaches? Does it mean a more consistent time of studying the Word and praying for the Spirit’s strength? Whatever it means specifically to you, the first call is the most important: “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Arm yourself with Jesus. Let His strength be your protection. A little girl was asked how she dealt with temptation. She replied, “Whenever Satan knocks on the door, I send Jesus to answer it.”

On the old TV show *Hee Haw*, Doc Campbell is confronted by a patient who says, “Doc, I broke my arm in two places.” The doc replies, “Well then, stay out of them places!” He may have something. We cannot regularly put ourselves in the face of temptation and not be affected. When faced with ongoing issues of temptation, we need to take the good doctor's advice and “stay out of them places.” When the tempter assures you that this particular sin will make you happier, more fulfilled, completed in your life, don’t give in to his lies. Sin always pretends to be a safe, secure and enjoyable ride. It is not.

Whenever we play with temptation, it is easy to drift into great danger. A woman was bathing in the Gulf of Mexico. She was enjoying the comfort of relaxing on an inflated cushion that kept her afloat. When she realized that she had been swept about a half mile out from the beach, she began to scream, but no one could hear her. A coast guard craft found her five miles from the place where she first entered the water. She did not see her danger until she was beyond her own strength and ability. (C. Swindoll, *One Step Forward*, p. 85) In a world where there are few warning signs posted to keep us out of harm’s way, in a world where it seems that even the well-educated and the well-heeled and even the well-intended people go on living without reference to God at all, it can be all too easy for us to just go along with the flow, not realizing that the flow is carrying us into dangerous waters, from which there just may be no escape.

Wednesday night we sang the hymn “Jesus, Grant that Balm and Healing,” concluding this way:

O my God, my Rock and Tower,	Grant that in Thy death I trust,
Knowing Death has lost his power	Since Thou trodd’st him in the dust.
Savior, let Thine agony	Ever help and comfort me.
When I die, be my Protection,	Light and Life and Resurrection.

The Christian’s joyful witness is sparked also by the reality that God is impartial in His dealings with people. “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” Whoever it may be who opposes you and your walk in Christ, you can safely assure that person that God loves him or her deeply, more deeply than we could ever understand. The reason you can be sure is that Christ has given His life for your healing, and you have learned through trial and trouble that God loves you and cares for you, despite your unworthiness.

Conclusion: Amidst the challenges and temptations to deny our Lord, we are called to whole-hearted faith and eager testimony to the grace of God in Christ. It doesn’t matter how few there are who have been called to that confession – the power of the Spirit is still ours to use in full measure. P.E. Kretzmann has written: “Christ and His full salvation is always present with us, in the Gospel-message which is proclaimed, in the Scriptures which are read, in the texts from the Bible which are memorized. And nothing more is needed than faith in this Word, assent to its content, and confidence in its promises. . . . If any person believes in his heart and confesses with his mouth that Jesus is the Lord and that God has

raised Him from the dead, then he has the faith which will give him salvation. . . Christians call upon, worship, the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as that of God. Their worshiping is a fruit, an expression of their faith. And by that faith, expressed in this confession, they take hold upon eternal salvation, they are saved by that Lord in whom they have put their trust. Thus the apostle brings out the universality of salvation, of the fact that is it intended for all men, that the Gospel, therefore, must be proclaimed in the whole world.” So take hold of this eternal salvation today. And let the faith of the heart be matched by the confession of the mouth as you interact with others to the honor and glory of your Savior Jesus. Then, like Israel of old, you too can “rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household. AMEN!