

Sunday Sermon
June 25, 2017
“Making Confession”
Romans 10:8b-13

Introduction

When I worked nights in the hospital as on-call chaplain, there was usually a routine to the twelve-hour shift from 8 PM to 8 AM. It started with rounds in the intensive care units. Then about 10 PM, the codes and traumas of the evening would begin—cardiac arrests, automobile and motorcycle accidents, domestic incidents, gang shootings or stabbings.

The pages would continue until about 3 or 4 AM. And then there would usually be a lull for a couple of hours, which was a chance to go to the on-call room and grab a little sleep.

One such shift, I had just gotten to sleep when the pager beeped. The number that showed on the display was the Rehab Unit. It was unusual to get a page to the Rehab Unit at 4 AM.

When I called, the nurse said, “We have a patient who says he wants to make a confession.” “At 4 in the morning?” I thought to myself. “Is this not something that can wait until daylight?” But I pulled myself out of bed and made my way across that big hospital to the rehab unit.

The room was dark so that the patient’s roommate could sleep. It was so dim that I could not see the patient’s face, and he could not see mine, which turned out to be fortunate. Because as I sat a chair and we chatted, I found myself nodding off. This is terrible, I thought, the man needs to make a confession, and I am falling asleep.

“So I understand you want to make a confession,” I said, hoping to move things along.

“Not really,” the man said, or confessed, “I just said that so they would page you. I could not sleep, and I wanted somebody to talk with. “How can I make a confession?” he said, “You have to believe in order to confess, and I am not sure what or if I believe.”

I.

“I am not sure” serves as a confession for many people. In contrast to that uncertainty, we have the first two words of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe.”

Over and over, at least a dozen times in the New Testament, Christians are called believers. And there is a good reason for that: Belief is at the heart of what Christians are and do.

Many times the reference is a call to believe. In Acts 16:31, Paul, speaking to the Philippian jailer, says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household.”

In our text in Romans, verse 9, Paul says, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

In the Apostles’ Creed and other creeds of the church, we confess with our mouth what we profess to believe in our heart. But do we believe and understand what we say we believe, or are we just going through the motions when we recite it in worship?

I heard of a Lutheran church in a village in Denmark where each Sunday the people would walk into the church for worship by way of the center aisle. At the front of the church over to the side, there was a blank white wall. Every Sunday, the people of that church would walk down the center aisle to the front of the church and then genuflect, that is, bend at least one knee and bow in respect . . . at the blank wall.

One day a visitor to the church asked about it, what the people were doing and why. He was told, “Well, that is just what we have always done.” Not satisfied, he investigated further and learned that many, many years earlier on that wall there had been a painting of the Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary. Then came the Protestant Reformation, and the church changed from being Roman Catholic to Lutheran, and the picture was painted over. But since the people had always bowed before the painting when they came in, they just kept on bowing even though there was nothing on the wall, and they did not know why they were bowing. (1)

Every Sunday when we stand, after hearing the word read and proclaimed, and confess our faith using a creed or statement it is not because it is what we have always done, a nice tradition. We do it because it is the essence of who we are; we are believers, we are confessors, we are testifiers, we are witnesses to the faith given us through God’s good grace.

But do we understand what it is we say we are confessing?

II.

To address that question, we must understand the Apostles’ Creed, not so much as a personal statement of faith but rather as a statement of our allegiance to the gospel and the church that proclaims that gospel.

Look at the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. When we recite it, we stand and face the flag and pledge allegiance to the flag and “the Republic for which it stands.”

Yet if I stop and think about it, there are some statements in that pledge that I might question or at least interpret in a different way. For example, the pledge says “One nation, under God, indivisible.” I could say that to declare that the nation is “indivisible” is to forget the horrors of the Civil War that indeed divided our nation, citizens against citizens. Or, I might point out all the divisions we have within our

nation today—economic, political, racial, and social, and even point out those who foster and exploit such divisions for personal gain.

And then there is the statement that this indivisible nation has “liberty and justice for all.” Some could say not for all where justice is miscarried, where the innocent suffer and the guilty go unpunished, or where the poor do not have enough resources to live with liberty and justice.

Yet, when it comes time to stand and say the pledge, I do not pick and choose some parts to say and some parts to skip. I do not do that because the pledge is not so much a description of what I or the individuals standing around me believe as it is a statement of the way our nation sees itself, partly in actuality and partly as an ideal.

The Apostles’ Creed is not so much our individual statement of faith as it is a statement of the faith of the church through the ages, a statement that shapes the identity of the church of Jesus Christ, much as the Pledge of Allegiance aspires to shape an identity as a nation. (2)

III.

Of course, if we were to write our own apostles’ creed, we might state differently a phrase or two, perhaps add some phrases of our own. But we are studying and learning an updated, reformed version of the Apostles’ Creed this summer—not to pick and choose which parts we like and which we dislike but rather to learn and understand more about who we are and who we aspire to be as believers, people of faith.

When we recite the words, we are declaring ourselves part of that countless multitude through the centuries who have found their identity in the same gospel and the same community of believers of which we are a part—a multitude that includes martyrs, mission workers, saints, and theologians, but who in the final analysis are nothing but redeemed sinners, like you and me. (3)

Conclusion

Was the patient in rehab right? Do you have to be sure of what you believe in order to make a confession? Saint Anselm, theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury did not think so. Anselm said: “I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order that I may understand. For . . . unless I first believe, I shall not understand.”

It is my belief that confession with the lips comes before it sinks into the heart, that we have to start speaking the words and then the Spirit plants them in our hearts.

It is interesting that the children know the pledge of allegiance. They could not have been saying it for very long. What, two or three years perhaps? Yet they know it.

And they know it by brain? No, that is not what we say. We say they know it by heart. It has become a part of who they are in their identity as citizens, residents, participants of this nation.

Such is the role of making confession in our faith.

Faith is a matter of the heart, but it starts on the lips.

May God give us the ability through the words we speak first to believe and then understand . . . not just by mind, but by heart. Amen.

Notes:

1. John R. Steward, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit*, Series 11, Cycle C, CSS Publishing Company, 1997, p 30.
2. Illustration adapted from Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Apostles' Creed for Today*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2007, pp. 7-8.
3. Ibid, pp. 8-9.