

**Romans 10: 5-15**  
**Matthew 14: 13-21**  
**August 10, 2014**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

In his letter to the Romans, Paul is troubled by the fact that, for the most part, Jews did not receive Jesus as the messiah. As a dyed in the wool Jew himself, Paul is confused and disturbed by this rejection. Yet at the same time he remembers a time that he was so hostile to this new Jewish sect that he hunted people down in order to stone them to death. It is a common but completely mistaken opinion that Paul turned from determined Pharisee to Christian anti-Semite. Paul remains for all his life, in his view anyway, a faithful Jew. He believes that God established the covenant with the Jewish people and that God cannot break that covenant. How can he reconcile the fact that, when God sent the messiah into the world God's people did not receive him? My reading of Paul is that he never resolves this question. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel he refuses to let go, praying for the blessing of an insight. I don't think it ever comes.

But in the passage we hear today Paul comes up with a stunning and very contemporary insight. The Jews are not unbelievers. They are not unfaithful to the covenant. Indeed they are far more faithful and obedient to the Law of Moses than their ancestors who practiced the religion of the Canaanite fertility cults, engaging in cult prostitution, worshiping phallic symbols and throwing their first born into sacrificial fires. Generations of Christian interpretation of the response of the Jews to Jesus has painted them as a rigid, blind legalistic hostile group who were so threatened by Jesus and his message that they demanded his death. It is certainly easy to see how such a one dimensional view could generalize into real prejudice and anti-Semitism.

But there is none of this in Paul. Instead Paul identifies the problem not as failure to honor the covenant; but as a form of spiritual blindness that happens when we confuse the means God has given for humanity to draw near to him—the Law of Moses—with actual intimacy with the Holy One of Israel. In Paul’s view—a view which has been confirmed by both Jewish and Christian scholars, many of the leading Pharisees and Sadducees had come to observe the Law for its own sake. This attitude we find in the fundamentalism in all religions. It teaches followers to follow a very limited and narrow interpretation of scripture—be it the Torah, Christian Bible or the Koran. Followers are taught that if they follow this interpretation to the letter they can be confident of God’s blessing, if not in this life, then in the hereafter.

One way of understanding the ministry of Jesus is to see him challenging this rigidity and narrowness. His entire ministry was at once to affirm the authority of the Law of Moses but also to show that the Law, and *all* scriptures point beyond themselves to the living God who gave the scriptures in the first place. In the words of Fr. Richard Rohr, Jesus wants to help us see that the Law of Moses, all scripture, tradition, doctrine and spiritual practice is the *container* for the life that God wants us to have, These important gifts are necessary structures to allow us to discover the grace of a loving God. Indeed, Jesus teaches that, in order to live in the grace of God instead of the security of laws and doctrines, one must be *born again*. Jesus means by this that we must let God transform our whole way of relating to God. No longer do we follow the outward formal practices and beliefs of religion—going to church, saying the prayers, singing the hymns, listening to the scriptures and sermon, going to committee meetings and thinking this is all there is. Instead we discover that the scripture and the daily practice of religion has prepared us for an incredible gift—the wonderful realization that we are loved completely and

cared for utterly by an unseen yet very present reality which we have come to call God; but which John the evangelist in his first letter proclaims is no more or less than *love* in its full and best sense. Peter in his first letter calls this “a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1:3)

We cannot experience this transformation while we are seeking security in established beliefs. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to awaken us to the living presence of God in the here and now. It is the work of the Holy Spirit through the clumsy vehicle of a sermon to awaken in you a desire for the living water which sparkles within the container of formal religious practices. But to do that we must heed the call to step out of the safe structure of established belief and out on the often stormy and confusing waters of life as it really is with our eyes, not on the drama of the storm but on Jesus who stands in the midst of the storm and waits for us to come to him.

There is no better illustration of this pattern for spiritual renewal than this wonderful story. The disciples are on their own with only the protection of the small fishing boat. The storm appears to have the power to overturn the boat. They may well perish if they try to row harder, pray more, do what the traditional practices tell them. But when Jesus appears, Peter courageously shouts, “Master, if it is really you (and not a ghost) bid me to come out of the boat and onto the water.”

What an amazing moment! It is the test and proof of Peter’s confession that Jesus is the messiah! His faith and trust cause Peter to demand that Jesus call him out of the container of all that is (but is not really) safe and secure in order to *come to Jesus where Jesus is—in the midst of calamity, uncertainty and threat*. This is all the more remarkable when you consider that the

voice that calls Peter might *not* be Jesus. *It might be* a ghost or an evil spirit seeking Peter's destruction. But this is where Peter's faithfulness to God and the teaching of the scriptures and the practice of worship and faith give him the discernment, the *wisdom* to trust that the figure is Jesus and his voice is reliable.

Friends, much wailing and gnashing of teeth has been made and continues to be made over the supposed decline of traditional practice of religion. I believe this is the predictable outcome of a practice of religion which has come to follow the outward rituals and has lost touch with the living presence of grace. If we want to see renewal in our own lives and in the life of the community of faith, we need to demand that Jesus call us out on to the stormy waters of life and discover there the true security of his presence.

*Then* we will have something to offer a world of people for whom this life is all there is and who see no value to joining a church which professes impossible things and blindly practices rituals which seem irrelevant to their lives. Yet many of these same people live lives aptly described by Henry David Thoreau as "lives of quiet desperation;" who struggle and strive to make the most of this life and who wonder if this life is all there is. If we have stepped out of the boat and onto the stormy waters where Jesus is we have an answer. Yes, there is more! Stop trying to be content with what *this* life offers enter the joy of new life in Jesus Christ! Step out! Leave the routine and come to the living God!

Yet, how can they believe unless they are told? How can they hear unless someone tells them? How can they tell them unless they are sent? And how can they hear a call unless they have stepped out of the boat and found Jesus in the midst of the storm? Amen.