

Palm Harbor United Methodist Church
September 20, 2020
Rev. Sharon Patch
I HAVE A QUESTION FOR YOU, DOES BELIEF MATTER?
ROMANS 10:5-15

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE-this is referenced in the sermon

Do you children have a special doll you love and really like to play with? Well, this is my doll and I don't play with her but she is special. Several years ago one of the women in my church made this doll for me. She knew that my husband had red hair, so she made this doll with red hair. She's not really the kind of doll you can play with because she is made from a plaster that is like glass and can break if you drop her.

Well, I asked this woman to make a special baby doll for me to use as baby Jesus at Christmas. She spent hours making this beautiful, life-like baby Jesus. I took the baby to church and placed him in a manger in one of our adult Sunday School rooms. During choir practice that evening some of the children, whose parents were in the choir, found the doll and started playing with baby Jesus. They started tossing the doll back and forth, and the doll landed on the floor and broke into many pieces.

The next day I found the broken doll. I was very sad. This very precious doll was ruined. The mother of the little girl who had broken my doll called me on the phone and said that they would like to come see me, because the little girl wanted to apologize. When they arrived, the little girl, who was about six or seven years old, was in tears and her mother insisted that she tell me she would give me the doll she was going to get for Christmas that year to replace the broken doll.

Now, do you think that it would have been fair for me to take her doll to replace baby Jesus? Her mother believed that was the fair thing to do. But, you see, I believed it was more important for the little girl to know that she was forgiven. The baby Jesus doll was broken but I couldn't break the heart of a little girl by taking her Christmas present. In the Bible, it is called "grace" when we forgive someone and don't ask them to pay for what they have done. This is one of the things we believe as Christians. We believe that Jesus paid for all the bad things we have done and so we are forgiven.

If someone commits a crime, the law says they have to pay for what they have done. And, they may get arrested and have to go to jail to pay for breaking the law. They have to pay the consequences for breaking the law. And, that seems fair and right but Jesus says, if we confess we have broken God's laws, and we believe in Jesus, we are forgiven. The slate is wiped clean. Jesus forgave that little girl and I forgave her and she was able to smile and enjoy the beautiful doll she got for Christmas.

SERMON

What do you believe? I'm going to share with you some of the things that I believe. I believe that God created heaven and earth. I believe this matters, because if we don't

believe God is the creator of all of life, we forget that all of life is a gift and that this planet we live on is a gift from God and we are called to protect and care for it.

I believe that Jesus was God's son and that he came to show us God's love and to offer us the gift of salvation. If we don't believe in Jesus, Christianity makes no sense. Jesus was God in the flesh and he came to show us God's love for us.

I believe the Holy Spirit is God's presence that comes to dwell within us. Jesus promised us the gift of the Holy Spirit as he was preparing to leave earth. Believing in the Holy Spirit's presence with us, means that we are not alone facing the problems that we encounter every single day. The Holy Spirit guides us, comforts us, and inspires us to be all God created us to be.

I believe in the church. The church is where I am challenged to love God more faithfully and where I am challenged to love my neighbors as much as myself. I have given the greater portion of my life to the church because I believe the church is important and our message is the message the world needs. I think these beliefs matter. This is the foundation upon which I have built my life.

I also believe that God wants to be in a relationship with us but that God does not force us into a relationship. It is one that we must choose. I also know that I fail almost every day to be all God would have me be. I am not as kind and loving, not as grateful and aware, not as tuned in to the needs of others as God would want me to be. I am selfish, self-centered, sometimes arrogant and rude, and that's just on a good day. I really do want to be a better person but, I know I fail and when I fail, I feel guilty.

In our society to day, guilt is a way of life. We feel guilty about almost everything. Few of us have committed a serious crime or done anything really terrible but we still feel this pervasive and heavy weight of guilt. None of us is perfect.

Now when we feel guilty, we can admit we are guilty or we can try to hide it.

I hope you've seen the You Tube video of the two-year old little girl who has liberally applied lipstick all around her mouth. Her father asks her if she did anything while she was in the bathroom. She says, "No. I was just getting my phone and putting on Yipstick." He asks her if she asked anyone if she could put on lipstick. She said, "No, I just asked me." Then dad asks whose lipstick it was. She says "it's mine." He says he thought it was her mother's lipstick but she says, "No, mom was just pretending it was hers." So, dad asks her where she got it. "I bought it at Homie Depot."

She is adorable but she is not going to admit that she has done anything wrong. Then she tries to shift the focus onto her mother. Throughout she asserts her innocence...while all the time she has Yipstick all around her mouth.

We are often just like this little girl. We deny our guilt, try to blame someone else, and all the time we assert our innocence even when the evidence clearly indicates that we are guilty. Yet, we know we have Yipstick all over us.

How can we undo all the mistakes, betrayals, and failures? How can we erase the long list of selfish and sinful acts? How can we be all God has created us to be? We can't. We are human and failure is built into our DNA.

However, there is hope. We are invited to enter into a relationship with a savior, Jesus Christ. Through him we are offered the grace of God who truly wants to free us from sin and give us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we might live a life that is more pleasing to God.

In our scripture lesson Paul is trying to explain how Jesus has become the bridge between these Jewish Christians and their Gentile Christian brothers and sisters. Faith in Jesus is all that is needed to become part of the family. They don't have to adopt all the Jewish rules and regulations. The covenant that God made with Abraham has now been extended to one and all. Paul pretty much tells them that if they think they can live according to the law, they don't know the law. God understands and that is why Jesus came to save us all. Being God's chosen people was meant to be a blessing and the law was meant to give them guidance for how to live as God's chosen people but the law had become a burden instead of a blessing. The list of dos and don'ts was exhausting and impossible.

There are times when I wish I had a list of dos and don'ts. I wish everything was in black and white. But, there are so many areas that are grey and neither black nor white. Just because something is legal doesn't make it right. And, just because something is right doesn't necessarily make it legal. I wish that it was just a matter of not breaking the law instead of not breaking God's heart. Just give me a list of laws and I will obey them. I obey the law, don't you. But, this is a legalistic way of living. If I break one of the laws I am guilty. If I obey the law, I am good. But, what about all those grey areas. No matter how hard I try, I continue to fail to live a perfect life. What if I somehow, even unintentionally fail, I need to know how to fix it.

I am a big fan of 12 step programs. First they tell you, you can't fix your problems on your own. You are powerless over this problem or addiction. You have to admit that you need God's help. You need to surrender the problem to God. Then you need to go to the people you have hurt and confess.

There is something about confessing your sin and guilt to another human being that is very difficult but also very freeing. Years ago confession was a requirement in the Roman Catholic Church. You had to confess before you could partake of Holy Communion. Parishioners entered the confessional and confessed to the priest. The priest was required to maintain confidentiality and even though he might have wanted to shout at them...No! No! How could you! He didn't do that. Instead, he gave the confessor prayers to recite and they were forgiven. The priest instructed them to go and sin no more. It was very simple. The problem was that priests recognized the same people came with the same confessions week after week and their confessions didn't seem to alter their behavior.

In the United Methodist Church as part of our communion ritual, we confess our sins privately to God. I'm always surprised at how quickly we move from confession to forgiveness. I'm just getting started confessing. Obviously, you people are a lot more holy than I am and don't need a lot of time. Whether we have a few sins to confess or a long laundry list, we are offered this gift of grace. We are forgiven. Yet, too often we leave the Lord's table and pick up that burden of guilt and take it with us. And, unfortunately, like our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, we continue to sin.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to confess and be forgiven and have the slate wiped clean and really leave it all behind. That is what Paul is saying. He is saying that Jew or Gentile, through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, we can have the slate wiped clean. We can be free of guilt and shame. So, why do we continue to carry around this weight of guilt on our shoulders? Why can we not just accept the grace of Jesus Christ? Why can we not believe we are forgiven.

Remember the little girl in my children's message who broke the baby Jesus. Well, she is now all grown up and doing children's ministry in Atlanta. I guess she wasn't too scarred by breaking Jesus, because I saw her at church a few months ago and mentioned the event and she had completely forgotten it. She had confessed and been forgiven. She had accepted the gift of grace extended to her. She was free. There was no need for her to remember and feel guilty. It was done. The slate was clean.

Friends, I believe, if we are going to be transformed by the love of Jesus, we have to admit to God that we have sinned. Remember sin is anything that separates us from the love of God. We need to confess and then do what we can to make amends and if we can't make amends, we need to accept that perhaps this is one of those times when we change what we can and simply accept that which we cannot change. However, we also need to go and sin no more. God forgives us and wants to transform our hearts if we will only be open to the work of the Holy Spirit within us.

Our lives should reflect that we have been transformed by an encounter with Jesus. Our transformation needs to be reflected in our relationships with our spouses, our children, the people with whom we work, our neighbors, our friends. We need to live as people who have been forgiven and who are experiencing the joy of salvation.

One of the things that I have learned is that forgiving yourself is the hardest part. I continue to remember the past and regret the times I have failed. In some ways that is not so bad. Remembering can be a reminder to prevent me from making the same mistakes again. Regret is a different matter. Regret means that we continue to beat ourselves up...often even when we have done nothing wrong.

I have a friend who has really been struggling. She keeps beating herself up because during this pandemic, she was not able to be with her sick husband during his dying. She regretted that he died sick and alone. She did nothing wrong, yet she has so much regret...she feels as though she let him down. This only makes her grieving more painful to endure.

This is the kind of regret that is so difficult to overcome. My advice to her is each time she thinks about those last days of his life when she was prevented from being with him, she remembers the many times during their lives together that she was there for him. Remember the many good memories she has of their time together. Remember the love they shared. And, remember his faith and his love for Jesus. She knows that he believed in Jesus and she knows that she believes in Jesus and therefore, they will see one another again.

I'm sure she is not alone. There have been many who have faced similar situations during these last few months. Yet, those who believe in Jesus and have accepted his promise of eternal life... have hope.

So, does belief matter? Oh, yes, it matters. We believe in God, who is creative, loving, and forgiving. We believe in Jesus, his Son, who died on the cross so that we might experience God's love and forgiveness and who promised us the gift of life abundant and life eternal, and we believe in the Holy Spirit, who comes to comfort us and to be with us and to give us the strength to go on in spite of grief, in spite of regret, in spite of guilt. It is through our faith in Jesus that our lives can be transformed.

We believe and because we believe we have hope and we have joy and we have peace and we are forgiven and our lives are transformed.