

“Believe in Your Heart”

Romans 10:8b-13

Jesus was born a Jew and died a Jew. He and his followers practiced circumcision, observed Passover, and mostly followed the law. They claimed that Judaism had corrupted the temple and abandoned the poor.

But these problems could be mended with a new leader. In the future, Jesus says in Matthew, “Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

St. Paul in today’s second lesson reinforces Jesus’ message that Judaism through Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection is now open to everyone who believes in their heart.

Romans 10:12-13 . . . “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved”.

Many flocked to hear this new preacher and his message of a coming kingdom that would include everyone. This aroused the suspicions of both the Jewish guardians of the temple and the Roman authorities. Jesus was ultimately crucified for his crimes against the state, a distinctly Roman method of execution.

Jesus’ story did not end there. His popularity ignited as his followers spread the word that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. They believed Jesus was the Messiah Jews had been waiting for centuries. He was, as Paul called him, the “Son of God”.

Jesus' followers – still Jews at the time – were so inspired by their belief that Jesus was the Savior that they rushed to share the gospel. “Join us!” they shouted to their fellow Jews. “The good news of the kingdom is proclaimed.” Few Jews came. Maybe the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans responding to Jewish revolutionaries made them skittish. Maybe they were blinded by habit. Perhaps they were un-persuaded. Whatever the reason, Jesus' disciples decided to broaden their appeal to include non-Jews.

The first to do this was Paul, the earliest apostle to write a lot about Jesus. Paul was a deeply believing Jew who at first was persecuting Christians. He has a conversion experience on the road to Damascus and becomes a deeply believing Christian. Paul was bright, very logical, and not formally educated. He was a man of action who was aggressive and combative with those who challenged him.

If you've studied or read the Bible, you know that Paul dictated a series of letters that are named for the people he sent them to, like the Thessalonians, the Galatians, the Corinthians, and today's text from his letter to the first century Christians living in Rome.

Paul had helped start churches in all of these places during his 3 missionary journeys and now was sending letters back to them to address particular problems in each community.

The biggest challenge was how to share the good news of Christ's resurrection with both Jews and non-Jews. Today we would call it the challenge of how to bring new members into Christ's church. Evangelism. Witness. Invitation. Delivering nut-rolls to visitors. Whatever it takes!

I'm wondering what Paul would write today to our churches. What would Paul have to say about evangelism, witness, invitation, and nut-rolls?

Before writing, Paul would observe that our 21st century church lives in a very different environment than the first century church.

The most powerful nation in the world – the Romans – were persecuting, crucifying, and using the slow and painful deaths of Christians in their coliseums for entertainment.

In our men's prayer group on Saturday mornings, Jim Deilly often gives thanks to God for living in a place where we can openly and freely worship God without fear of persecution. It is a good reminder of what many of us take for granted.

So if Paul could bring in thousands of new members, knowing that if they get caught worshipping or even get caught hanging out with other Christians, they could easily and legally be martyred then how would he approach our church's situation today?

Obviously, it would depend on where he's at in the world as the context is very different in Europe, in the Middle East, in Russia, in China, and most certainly in Africa which is the only place in the world where the church, especially the Lutheran Church is growing by leaps and bounds.

But let's imagine Paul is doing one of his missionary journeys here in the United States of America. He would quickly discover that our historic mainline denominations, Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodist, Baptists, United Church of Christ, and others have memberships in decline across the board.

Paul would learn about what we call non-denominational churches that are usually very large, very wealthy, and independent of one another. They would be the opposite extreme of the house churches Paul visited in the first century.

Paul would be mesmerized by the very different worship experiences depending on the size of the church. The smaller churches would be closest to the worship services he preached at in people's homes.

One time, one of Paul's sermons was so long that a man sitting in an open window fell asleep and fell backwards out the window! The pastor primarily leads the worship and does most of the ministry during the week. It is a model that has difficulty attracting new members, especially if there aren't enough children for a Sunday school or an active youth ministry.

Paul would definitely be mesmerized while worshiping at what we call a mega-church, usually a non-denominational church delivering people to worship by the bus-load. He would be taken aback by the focus on music performed by paid, professional musicians, who are playing some very strange and loud instruments. Paul would notice that no one was falling asleep during a fiery sermon of master story-telling. He would question how his letters that made it into the Bible were pretty much being ignored and yet this church is packed with people who want to hear good music and good story-telling.

Then Paul would come to worship at Divinity, neither a small church nor a mega-church. The pastor would tell him that to really experience Divinity worship, you need to worship at all 3 services because they are very different from one another.

The Saturday night chapel service would remind him most of his house churches, informal, people greeting one another as they come in, no robes, Holy Communion, hearing God's word and receiving Christ's presence every Saturday. This Saturday we moved to the sanctuary to celebrate the baptism of Teagan Rae Ganzke to make room for her family members witnessing God adopting her into his family and promising to raise and nurture her in the Christian faith.

When Paul came back at 9:00 on Sunday morning he would be reminded of the smaller church's worship, but with many people leading the worship, choirs, Bible readers, prayer leaders, acolytes, ushers, children sermonizers, Holy Communion assistants, altar care. Paul would ask me how we keep it all coordinated and I would tell him, 70 years of practice.

Adult forum would be interesting that morning and then the 11:00 worship, reminding him of the mega-church worship only with volunteer musicians, some liturgy, and a sermon that may have a story in it, but is always based on scripture and often refers to his letters.

Paul would probably say that much has changed in the church but the message remains the same. It's good news.

Romans 10:8b-9 . . . "The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach), because, 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."

May the peace of God . . .

