

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Proper 14, Year A, August 13, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“What does it mean to be a Christian?”
Romans 10:5-15

“What does it mean to be a Christian?;” that question may seem to have an obvious answer, but you will find that different people offer quite different answers to it; to some people it means being born into and raised in a Christian family; to some it means being listed on the membership roll of a church and attending when, and if, the mood strikes them; but clearly, that equates being a Christian with the most nominal of circumstances

so we might want to be more specific with our question and rephrase it as this: “what does it mean to be saved?;” even here, well-meaning Christians disagree; to some, being saved means having been baptized; to some it means following a certain set of Christian rules--yet as you go from one denomination to another you will find large differences of opinion about just which rules must be followed; and to others being a saved means having made a verbal and heartfelt commitment to Christ

that last answer is the one we find in our reading from Romans ch. 10 today; verse 9 says “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved;” if you are familiar with what is called the “Romans Road to Salvation,” often found in tracts about how to become a Christian, or how to be saved, you will recognize this verse as a key step in that process; but that is an over-simplified answer, and it has never been a sufficient answer for Episcopalians; we look instead at a larger understanding gleaned from a wider reading into scripture

we recognize that Paul, who wrote Romans, does not himself think that salvation is achieved only by confessing with lips and believing in the heart; Paul wrote these words, yes, but he did not consider himself “saved;” he recognized that his, and our, saving relationship with Christ is a more complex and ongoing process than just saying something or believing something

in Philippians (3:13-14), Paul refers to his own salvation this way: “I do not consider that I have made it ... but ... forgetting what lies behind and straining

forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus;" for Paul, salvation is never a done deal, never one that is fixed and set at any point in his life; there is never a moment in one's life when you can say, 'I'm right with God and that will never change'

Paul says more about this in 1st Corinthians (15:1-2): "Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you;" notice that "you are being saved" is a recognition of an ongoing process; and that "if you hold firmly" is a conditional statement; one's belief and one's actions both must continue to be carried out in concrete ways throughout one's life

to fully sum up the theology of salvation as expressed by Paul you cannot simply say, "I am saved;" you have to recognize that you are always in the middle of an ongoing process of salvation; what you can say is these three things--all of them, and not just one of them: "I have been saved, by Christ's death upon the cross for my sins; I am being saved, because God and Christ are at work in me now through the Holy Spirit; and I will be saved, when this age comes to an end and Christ gathers all the faithful into his resurrection;" past, present, and future elements are all a part of salvation

and look at what Jesus himself says in John (14:6): "I am the way and the truth and the life;" salvation is a lifelong commitment of following Jesus' way, enacting Jesus' truth, and modeling your life after Jesus' life; you have heard me say before that Christian life is a journey, a pilgrimage along the road of faith; being a Christian, being saved, is a lifelong journey; day in and day out, Jesus calls us to be renewed in our hearts, in our minds, in our words, and in our actions; learning from him; growing in him; this process is one of ongoing relationship--relationship to God, to Christ, and to the Holy Spirit; and also our ongoing relationship to all of God's children

if you go to a doctor, and that doctor sees you have a major illness, yet ignores telling you about it, that doctor is guilty of medical malpractice; likewise, if I were to fail to address the tragic events in Charlottesville yesterday, I would be guilty of theological malpractice; I do not address this as a political issue, but as a religious one, and as a biblical one; I was not only shocked and saddened by those events, but also shocked to read in

yesterday's Richmond paper that some of the white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville yesterday claimed to be Christians; in one of their statements of beliefs, they say that they want to return the South to being (quote) "White Man's Land;" this shows a tremendous ignorance of history to presume that any place in America was ever a "White Man's Land;" the first African slaves arrived at Jamestown VA in 1619 and our nation's wealth, both in the North and South, was built upon the foundation of an ungodly system of racial slavery; it is not possible, by any stretch of the imagination, to be a white supremacist and to claim to be a Christian; any kind of racial supremacy is the complete opposite of what Jesus taught and lived; remember Jesus' summary of the law (Luke 10:27): "love ... God ... and your neighbor as yourself"

and look at the photos of the rally; you will see swastikas and Nazi salutes; this is exactly what the 'Greatest Generation' of Americans fought against in the 2nd World War; it is not possible, by any stretch of the imagination, to be a white supremacist and to claim to be supporting American values, or American heritage

for years we have heard appeals to Muslims to distance themselves from and denounce those who commit acts of hate, terror, and violence in a false interpretation of Islam; now the shoe is on our foot; it is up to us Christians to distance ourselves from and to denounce anyone who commits acts of hate, terror, and violence in a false interpretation of Christianity; all who have a saving relationship with Christ will respond accordingly

we need to pray for those who were killed and injured yesterday; and we need to pray for those who are enemies of Christ and enemies of what America stands for; let us pray from the *Book of Common Prayer* p 820 # 18, "For our Country:" Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage: We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favor and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honorable industry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy Name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the

time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.