

"The Real Question"
Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent
Lectionary Year C
February 21, 2010
Texts: Luke 4:1-13; Romans 10:8b-13
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Picture, if you will, a scene like this: You are a boy about eight to ten years old. Another boy at school has been picking on you for weeks. He has made your life miserable. He has called you names, he has pushed you down at recess, he has taken some of your things. He has even made you look bad in front of the little girl in your class you have a crush on but have not been able to work up the courage to talk to yet. You have gotten to the point where you hate going to school. You wish you could just run away and hide.

One day, as this boy is picking on you once again, something snaps inside you. You've turned the other cheek so many times, you've got whiplash. You finally have had enough of it, and you tell him how you feel about him. You tell him that he is nothing but a bully and that you are tired of being picked on and pushed around. You tell him that you are mad and that you are not going to take his treatment of you anymore.

What is his response? He says something like this: "You're absolutely right. I have been incredibly insensitive toward you, and I apologize. You don't deserve the abuse I have inflicted on you. You have every right to be angry with me. I am really glad we had this talk and that you were honest enough to hold me accountable for my behavior. I promise I will never again treat you in such a cruel and heartless

manner." What are the odds? In your dreams he says this to you. No, when you tell him just what you think of him, what he actually says back to you is something more like, "What are you going to do about it?" He invites you to act on your feelings toward him. He gives you the opportunity to do something about how you have come to regard him and his treatment of you.

On this first Sunday in Lent, I would like to suggest to you that the real question of faith is this same question. The real question of faith is not, "What do you believe?" The real question of faith is, "What are you going to do about it?" The real question of faith has to do with how you are going to act on your beliefs, what difference those beliefs are going to make in your life, how your beliefs are going to affect what you think, say, and do.

I think this question, "What are you going to do about it?," is the question Satan poses to Jesus in the temptation experience. In the account of that experience you heard read earlier, Jesus, the Son of God, has received the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's power at his baptism. The voice from heaven has confirmed Jesus by saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This same Spirit—who has filled and empowered Jesus to be the Messiah, to be the Chosen One of God, to be the Savior of the world—this same Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by the devil over a forty day period. And Satan says to Jesus, in essence, "Okay, you're the Son of God. That's who you believe yourself to be and who you believe God has called you to be. Now what are you going to do about it?"

Satan gives Jesus some choices. Jesus can be the kind of Messiah

who uses his power for his own purposes, to meet his own needs. He can turn stones into bread. Or he can choose to gain worldly power, prestige, and authority without having to die on the cross. In other words, he can take the easy way out. All Jesus has to do is to choose the way of the world instead of the way of God, and Satan will make sure all the world is given to him. Or Jesus can use his power to do spectacular feats to impress people and seek to meet their expectations of what a Messiah is supposed to be and do. He can jump off the top of the temple without being injured.

"What are you going to do about it, Jesus? What are you going to do about your belief that you are the Messiah of God?" That is what Satan wants to know. And Jesus tells him what he is going to do about it. He is going to be *God's* Messiah—not his own Messiah, not the world's Messiah, and not even his own people's Messiah. Jesus is going to do *God's* will and no one else's.

I think that the real question of "What are you going to do about it?" can not only be seen in Jesus' temptation experience, it can be seen in what Paul describes as the essence of what we, as Christians, should profess as our faith in Christ. Please look again at the passage from Romans 10. Paul is giving us here another one of those "bottom line" statements of faith we encounter from time to time in scripture. Paul says that "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. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved."

What makes this statement a "What are you going to do about it?"

kind of question? In order to understand Paul's profession of faith in this way, I think we need to look closely at what the Apostle is saying here and unpack it a little. Paul says that if we do *two* things, we will be saved. That is to say, if we do these *two* things, we will be delivered from our lostness caused by sin, be able to experience restored fellowship with God, and be able to live as authentic persons [Dominy, *God's Work of Salvation*, 118-21].

The two things we are to do to be saved are these, according to Paul: believe in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead and then confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord. What do these things mean for us, and why are they both important?

Salvation is presented to us as a gift of God by grace. It must be appropriated by us through faith, and Paul shows us that faith involves first of all believing that God has raised Jesus from the dead. This belief in the resurrection is important, because the resurrection provides the historic grounding for our faith and keeps faith from being mere wishful thinking. We don't just believe in God as Ultimate Reality or the Spirit in the Sky, we believe in the God who has raised Jesus.

The fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead says something about God, that is, that God is a liberating God, and it says something about Jesus, that is, that Jesus lived and died in such a way as to be vindicated and exalted by God. Jesus' resurrection is important because it shows that God can be trusted to overcome death. Trusting in your heart in *that* God, the God who has raised Jesus from the dead, is what leads to a right relationship with God [Achtmeier, *Interpretation*, 169].

But as Paul states here, it takes more to be saved than simply believing in your heart, no matter how important that is. Faith also involves confessing with your lips. We are to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord, and to make this confession means to acknowledge that Jesus shares the name and nature, the holiness, and authority, power, majesty, and eternity of the one and only true God [Cranfield, *Romans*, 259].

You see, it is simply not enough to believe in your heart. We must give that belief expression with what we say about Jesus and how we live with respect to Jesus. Believing is an inward act; confessing is an outward act. Faith involves both aspects of our lives—inward and outward. Believing in our hearts without confessing with our lips is keeping a secret. Confessing with our lips without believing in our hearts is lying.

I think what Paul is suggesting here, that faith requires both believing *and* confessing, makes what he says a "What are you going to do about it?" question of sorts. He is saying, in essence, "What are you going to do about what you believe in your heart? Are you going to just let it sit there, or are you going to act on it in some way? Are you going to keep that belief a secret, or are you going to express it openly by what you say and what you do? So you believe that God has raised Jesus from the dead; that's well and good. What difference is that going to make in your life? What changes in your attitude and in your behavior will that belief cause to take place? How are you going to confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord?"

"What are you going to do about it?" It's the question that came

to Jesus. It's the question Paul posed to the church in Rome. It's the real question, and it's the question that is coming to you and me today. We believe; now let us confess. Let us confess that Jesus is indeed our Lord by the way we live under his lordship. Let our beliefs be made concrete by how we feel about ourselves, that we are a precious child of God, and how we treat other people, as our brothers and sisters in Christ. Throughout this season of Lent and beyond, may we as individuals and as a church make every aspect of our living a confession to his lordship. That's what we are going to do about it.