

Scriptures: Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Trusting God

Trusting in God is important. It's the main point that Jeremiah makes in our first reading today, and which was reinforced to our kids during sermon on the steps. When we trust God, He makes us grow strong, and helps us produce good fruit. Later today, people across the country, and even the world, will tune in to watch Super Bowl 56, to see whether the Bengals beat the Rams, or vice versa. It's a multi-billion dollar operation.

The other night I sent out a church-wide email with several prayer concerns in it – if you didn't get that email, and want to receive regular messages by email, catch me after worship so I can add you to the church email group. I said there, and I'll say again, there are times when I struggle with worry and fear, and lose focus on what I should be focusing on. That's true for all of us. In our human-ness, we tend to focus on those things which cause us to worry, rather than staying focused on the One who loves us most, and trusting that He's taking good care of us.

I have had some personal difficulties over the past two weeks in the area of time management. Besides being a husband, a dad, doing the usual teaching gig, and the things I do around here as your pastor, I've also been frantically writing papers and completing half of the coursework for one class in the Course of Study requirements. In accordance with the Book of Discipline, to maintain my status here with you as a licensed local pastor I have to complete eighteen additional courses besides the one I'm currently taking, over the course of the next nine years. The academic work of it – the thinking, reading, writing, and constant prayer is exhausting.

I sometimes think about, and worry over, who in our church family may be slipping through our proverbial fingers by not having, or taking, the time to do the visitations we would like to have done here. Friends, I need your help to reach our shut-ins, especially, so they know we haven't forgotten them and that we love them. They need to know that they're precious in His sight. I can't do it alone. I'm counting on each of you – God is counting on you – as confirmed members who've taken those vows affirming your faith, to step in and fill the gap to reach all the people. Last week we talked about the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15, and the basis of our faith – the gospel of Jesus Christ. This week we're going to continue in that chapter, looking at verses 12 through 20. I'll be reading from the New International Version today, so if you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn to 1 Cor. 15:12-20 with me. **Read 1 Cor. 15:12-20.**

S(o)uper Bowl

Can you imagine the change we would see in the world, if instead of spending mega-bucks on Super Bowl, people did things like we've done here, with Souper Bowl and Agape? Collecting food and money, to give to the least of these brothers and sisters of our King? It would be a real game-changer. What if the competition, instead of football, focused more on numbers of people reached for the glory of Jesus Christ, like an Emmaus Walk, on steroids? I'm all for having sports activities, if that's your thing. But what if people actually made conscientious decisions that for every dollar they spent on entertainment, they would also give a dollar to the church or to various organizations we know give 100% of contributions to people who need it, like Agape, and others?

That would be putting our faith into real, tangible action, and we'd change the world! The problem is, some people in the church pay lip service to following Jesus Christ. They only want to follow Him if doing so is convenient for them at that point in time. We think this is a problem we've got, but we see Paul dealing with the same sorts of problems in the Corinthian Church. "If it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" Paul asks in the first verse we read today. There were people running around in those days saying, in a nutshell, you live, then you die, and that's it.

We hear that today too, from various unplugged people. They're unplugged from the Source of Life – Jesus Christ. What if the people in the ancient world, maybe even in that ancient church, were watching some of the Corinthian Christians, who continued to live sinful lives? It's a sure thing that there were people in the Corinthian Church who paid lip service to following Jesus Christ, but went on living their lives as though Jesus Christ was a stranger to them. It's a certainty that those folks weren't renewed – they weren't being remade in His image, because they weren't plugged into Him! If we use the term "resurrection" figuratively, instead of literally, then there were some folks there who weren't being resurrected – they were still dead in their sins.

No Resurrection?!

I don't think that's the concept though that Paul's getting at here. Look at the next verse. He says, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised," (verse 13). Paul's talking about the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's verifiable. It's provable. We talked about that some last week in the first part of the chapter – Jesus' disciples saw Him after He had died on the cross, and laid dead for three days in the tomb. Paul told us that 500 guys had eyewitness, first-hand accounts of seeing Jesus' physical body days, even weeks, after He had risen from the dead. We talked some about Jesus appearing to women, too. Unfortunately, Paul didn't record how many ladies saw Jesus after He came back to life.

When Paul wrote this in the original language, he used the same verb form seven times over the first twenty verses of this chapter, and in each instance it refers to the certainty of the physical body of Jesus Christ being resurrected. He came back to life. Aren't you glad you know that this morning, church? Notice what he tells us next. He says, "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith," (verse 14). Those are some strong words Paul uses, and he doesn't stop, he goes on. "More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that He raised Christ from the dead. But He did not raise Him if in fact the dead are not raised," (verse 15).

In other words, If Jesus didn't physically come back to life, our preaching is pointless, our faith is pointless, and we're liars when it comes to talking about God. Lying about God is bad – that's the sort of thing the nasty, old devil does, but it's not the worst thing that Paul tells us in the passage. He says, "If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins," (verses 16-17). Can you imagine a world without the hope we find in Jesus Christ? It would be awful! It would be terrifying. Every bad ending to some book series you've read, every scene from horror movies you may have watched, all going on and on and on, with no happy ending. The whole world would be a dark, miserable place!

Resistance is Futile, Assimilate or be Destroyed

Think about your faith, what you personally believe about Jesus Christ, and what He's done for you, and keeps on doing for you even now. Paul indicates that if Jesus didn't come back to life, then our faith is futile – in other words, it's pointless. It's worthless. Every time I hear that word, "futile," I think back to my teenage years, when I'd sit and watch Star Trek: The Next Generation on television. In season two or three of that series, Captain Picard is abducted by these cyborg-like aliens called the Borg. The Borg's favorite catchphrase which is used every time they show up in any of the Star Trek series is, "Resistance is futile. Assimilate or be destroyed." Even though they are humans with robotic attachments, they remind me of bugs because they have a shared mind which they call "the Collective." If Jesus Christ hadn't died, if He hadn't resurrected on Easter morning, resistance to sin would be futile. And, we would still be lost in our sins.

You know friends, sometimes people don't like to hear the truth. Sometimes the truth hurts. We're called, as followers of Jesus, to speak the truth with love. We have friends, maybe extended family members, acquaintances we know, who are still lost in their sins because they haven't heard the gospel. It's sad, but true. In the greatest country in the world, we live in worry and fear about professing and sharing our faith in the Risen One with people we don't know because we're too concerned about what they might think of us.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying we call them out on the sins they are committing. If we did that, in some cases, we'd be calling them out until the cows come home! Everyone sins. It's in our human nature to be prone to wander from God's good and perfect will. I'm a sinner, being turned gradually into a saint, and you are, too. What I'm saying is, we need to tell people the story of Jesus Christ, God wrapped in human flesh, Who was crucified, dead, buried, and resurrected three days later.

We need to tell people how He has redeemed us – how He is redeeming us – and is remaking us into His own image. That's the truth people who don't know Him most need to hear. That's what the world needs to hear from the Church. Friends, that's what needs shouted out this evening during the halftime show to a watching world. And it's what we shout out every year when we do this – Souper Bowl Sunday – when we show God's love to the least and the lost right here in Shelby County. It's a tangible, visible reminder to us of how Jesus took poor, blind sinners groping around in the darkness – that's you and me – and through His atoning work, He opened our eyes so we could see the dazzling brilliance of His Goodness and Light!

Game Over

Paul says even “those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost,” in verse 18, talking about those who have died, and who believe in Jesus. Paul wasn't a lawyer, but he's making a legal case here that if Jesus didn't come back to life on Easter morning, it's all over for us. We understand that because we follow Jesus. Without Jesus, we're toast. It's game over. Permanently. Paul expands this idea, saying, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all people,” (verse 19). There are people in the world, you'll meet them if you start being vocal about what you believe regarding who Jesus is, and what He's done for us, who do not believe. And it's not that they just don't believe, but they flat-out reject Him.

If you spend time talking with them, they may even try to get you to question your faith. I had that happen before, and never really could come up with a rational, reasonable rebuttal to our societal, cultural idea that Jesus doesn't really matter or fit in our world. We have the historical record in our hands today. The Bible is a factual, historical account of events which happened in human history between God and humanity across a span of roughly 3,000 years or so. And since Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, how many people have willingly paid the price for putting their faith in Him with their lives?

Paul says, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep,” in the last verse (20) of our text today. I want you to think about this with me. Generally, the further away from an event in time a person is, the less we're able to recall it. We all can agree on that. No one here recollects the Civil War, even though we know it happened. We've read about it in history books, maybe some of you heard stories from grandparents or great-grandparents of people

they knew who were involved in it. But no one living today recalls the Civil War from an eyewitness perspective, and it only happened 160 years ago or so. We don't see a whole lot of people today publicly saying that they have a right to keep another human as a slave, and when we do, we think they're nuts! Right?

Christian Martyrs

But it's been roughly 2,000 years since Christ was crucified and rose to life, and yet people are still willing – today – to put their lives on the line for having faith in Him. According to Dr. Todd Johnson, a professor at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, an “estimate that more than 70 million Christians have been martyred over the last two millennia, more than half of which died in the 20th century under fascist and communist regimes. We also estimate that 1 million Christians were killed between 2001 and 2010 and about 900,000 were killed from 2011 to 2020.”¹

Friends, people today wouldn't willingly die to reimpose things like slavery, yet they're willing to die for faith in Someone who drops from our historical record 2,000 years ago. Why? That's the question to ask an atheist – the rebuttal they need to hear – why would people even today be willing to die for their faith in Jesus Christ? When they are face-to-face with an executioner because of their faith in Christ, and are told, “Resistance is futile, assimilate (renounce your faith in Christ) or be destroyed,” what is it that causes them to willingly die? It's because they know, with no doubts in their minds, that He's still alive, present, active, and they've become eyewitnesses to what He's done, and continues to do through the presence of the in-dwelling Holy Spirit in their lives, who He sends to us at Pentecost. Do you have a faith like that? Jesus Christ is the first One who rose from the dead, but praise God, friends, He's not the last One, or only One!

“Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed,” (1 Cor. 15:51-52, NRSV). When we trust Jesus Christ, and put our faith in Him, we've got nothing to worry about. He's taking great care of us! And someday, He's going to come and bring us home to Himself! Praise God!

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, You have promised to never leave or forsake us. Teach us day by day the deep rewards of faithful ministry and most of all help us to know always the reward of being near to You. In Your name we pray, Amen.

¹ Todd Johnson, *Christian Martyrdom: Who? Why? How?*, at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, 12/18/2019. Retrieved 2/11/2022, from <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/christian-martyrdom-who-why-how/>