

## Knowing Faith By Heart

<sup>NRS</sup> Rom 10:8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.<sup>11</sup> The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."<sup>12</sup> For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.<sup>13</sup> For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Every night I'm home, we have a pretty good routine in the Evers-Hood house. After we eat, if there's time, we play. Then, around 7, Melis does baths and a few stories. And then, after that I go up and Will I and I do more stories, then prayers, and then songs. Every once in a while, though, something will disrupt this ebb and flow that we've established. This Christmas, for instance, Will began to have questions about Jesus- specifically about Jesus' death.

"Did Jesus die at Christmas?" he said to me one night as I was just about to do a story.

Not wanting my three year old to be thinking about anyone dying at Christmas, much less Jesus, I quickly respond: "No, Jesus doesn't die at Christmas."

"But he does die."

Knowing I was caught, "Yes. But not at Christmas."

"When? When does Jesus die?"

"Um...at Easter." But then I added quickly hoping to lighten this morbid line of questioning, "But he comes back to life- that's what Easter is all about."

And that's when Will laid down the hammer. He looked into my eyes and said, "But *why* does Jesus die?"

Three years old, and I get why does Jesus die? I'm not thinkin' this does not bode well for our future. So, I think and I think. I think how on earth do you make the crucifixion and atonement makes sense on a preschool level? It was like the children's sermon from hell. So I think and I think- and then, I give what I thought was a pretty good explanation. I started to tell Will how mean people, because he knows about mean people, wanted Jesus to stop making good choices and loving so many people. I tell him the mean people say he has to make a choice once and for all. He could keep living but be mean like them. Or, he could keep loving us, and die. And that Jesus chose to love us- even when it meant he would have to die. Now, I was feeling really good about this. Not entirely theologically accurate, maybe- but a pretty good start.

Well, when I finally finish this masterful theological exposition, Will doesn't say a word. He's speechless, I think. He's really thinking about it- really taking it all in. Eager to know his thoughts, I say, "So...what do you think?" And he turns to me with his finger in his mouth and says, "Daddy, I can touch my teeth."

I think Paul would relate to this story. See, Paul is one of the most intellectually gifted writers in all the Bible. But the truth is- he doesn't always get to put all that brain to use.

Now, why do I say Paul is so smart. Well, the language, the way he writes- it's incredible. His vocabulary is immense. The grammar he uses is complicated. In fact Paul even employs something grammarians call the optative mood- something incredibly rare in the New Testament. It was used frequently by philosophers like Plato and

Aristotle, but less so by common story tellers- the kind of people who wrote the New Testament. It's one of the ways we know Paul was a cut above the rest.

Now, while Paul isn't dealing with three year olds, he is dealing with fledgling churches all over the mid-east.. And most of the time he doesn't have the luxury of making really well thought out, complicated theological explanations about everything- he just has time to put out one fire after another, trying to keep these churches afloat.

Sometimes I wonder if Paul got frustrated. All that brain, and no where to go with it, really. But you know if he did- that never comes through in his letters. In fact it's just the opposite. One of the things I love the most about Paul is that even though he is incredibly book smart, as much at ease quoting from poets and philosophers of the day as he was with Scripture- as intellectual as he is, he knows that head knowledge, while good, is not nearly as important as what we know in our hearts.

He writes: "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." (And please remember, for Paul and for all the writers of the New Testament, salvation is just as much about experiencing God's shalom, God's peace, right here and now in the present, as it is about the future.) He continues: "For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved."

You and I, and most Greeks, too by the way- when we think of beliefs, when we think of what we believe. We think about what's going on in our heads. In our minds.

And when we contemplate what we feel- then we move down to our heart.

For us, beliefs are a head thing- not a heart thing.

But not for Paul. Not for Paul. No, Paul rejects the split you and I make between thinking and feeling- Paul tells us the heart has a reasoning all it's own.

See what Paul is telling us is that our salvation, our sense of peace and wholeness- this doesn't come by trying to perfect ourselves, or by studying and studying until faith finally makes sense in our minds. No, in fact it's just the opposite. Our salvation, our peace, he says- comes not from the beliefs in our head- but what it is we know in our hearts, what it is we know to be true right here.

Now, Paul isn't telling us not to think, not to study, not to learn more. Paul is not an anti-intellectual. We've got plenty enough of that around. He's simply telling us that all of this thinking we do- well, all of this comes second. What comes first, what is most important- is what we hold in our heart.

The movie Radio, with Cuba Gooding Jr. and Ed Harris, tells the true story of how a football coach in South Carolina came to care for a young, developmentally disabled, African-American young man, a young man they started to call Radio because of his love for tinkering with them. Coach Jones literally puts his job and reputation on the line by spending so much time and caring for Radio the way he did. Throughout the movie, the people who love him and who are concerned about it ask him over and over again why he's helping, why he's including, Radio. And all he can do is just shake his head and say he doesn't know. He doesn't know.

And I love this, because he really didn't know- not in his head anyway, not in a way that would be logical, and easy to explain.

The closest he gets is towards the end of the movie, just before facing the choice of quitting his job or caring for Radio, Coach Jones has a conversation with his daughter, his daughter who has been frustrated at how much time her dad is spending with this strange young man- and how little time he's been spending with her. They're in his old pick up truck late one night. And after he stops the car he tells her he wants to say something. And he tells her about how, when he was a boy, he a paper route. And one day, when he was riding his bike through the woods through one of the poorest parts of town- he heard this noise. It was like an animal screeching. He slowed down on his bike- it sounded like it was coming from this old, run down house. It didn't look like anyone was home, and he walked over to it. Underneath the steps going up to the house, he saw barbed wire making a kind of cage underneath. And he stepped closer and closer- trying to see what was under there in the dark. And then, all of a sudden he saw fingers come through the fence. And he could see the face of a boy- a boy just about his age. And he could tell something was wrong with the boy, but he didn't know what.

And then, Coach Jones looks at his daughter. He says, "And for two years. I rode past that house and didn't do a thing. I didn't lift a finger to help him."

Jones may not have been able to explain why he loved Radio, why he had no choice but to help the young man with his head- but he knew what was right in his heart.

Friends, everybody here this morning is differently abled. Some of us are like Paul- we're smart and have great educations. And that's great. Put it to good use. Some of us have different gifts, though. Some of us have the ability to make someone laugh

and bring joy to others. Some of us have the gift of remembering others when they're feeling down. And some of us have the ability to light up a room just with our smile.

And you know- no matter what abilities we come in here with this morning, Paul is right. The most important thing for all of us is the same- it's not what we're capable of doing with our minds, but what it is that fills our hearts, that really counts.

Perhaps the greatest theologian of our time, Karl Barth, was once asked by a reporter if he could summarize his whole theology for him. It's a ridiculous question- Barth's works would fill nearly an entire bookshelf. But Barth, this towering intellectual, the man whose face even made the cover of Time magazine in 1962, thought about it for a minute, and then smiled and then spoke from his heart, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Beloved, what's in your heart this morning? What's in your heart? This morning hear Paul's good news- when Christ lives in our hearts, we will not be put to shame. For there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, or between those of us with different abilities. The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to those who call upon him.

**Amen.**