



August 9, 2020

In Our Heart; On Our Lips

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Psalm 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15

There is something about the Grant Building downtown that I like. Maybe I should say that, among the things having to do with the Grant Building, there is one that I particularly like. You probably know what it is. From the time it was built, it was designed to send out a message. Buildings can communicate messages. They can say they are grand or humble; they have a political or theological message; they send out the vibes to come on in, or to stay away — all of this, and more, if the architects are skilled at their profession. But the Grant Building sends out a specific message in Morse Code. You know what it says: P-I-T-T-S-B-U-R-G-H. Every night since March 1929, a bright, red beacon has flashed on the Pittsburgh skyline. The beacon sits atop the historic Grant Building and, in international Morse Code, spells the city's name. Whenever you can see the light from its beacon, you know where you are.

I have been thinking about the Grant Building lately. Because it sends out a message that others can see and do something about if they so choose. In that way, it is kind of like the witness of a Christian, who sends out the message of Jesus Christ, and whose life spells out the grace of Jesus Christ.

Throughout his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul makes it clear that the Law of the Old Testament is so demanding and so impossible to fulfill that it is bad news. Thereafter, he tells them the good news. In Christ, God has made salvation available to all.

In Christ, God has looked at every person and has said: rejoice. The blessings of freedom from sin are yours. Rejoice, the finality of death is gone. Realize, you can dare approach God with trust. You can receive grace and goodness that you do not have to earn. It has happened to Paul. It has happened to the people who first heard the message. It has happened down through the ages. And guess what? You can have it, too. *"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart."*

I suspect that there may be someone who wonders about that. Does God mean me? I am not what I would call an exemplary person. I have made more mistakes than I care to admit. For God to love and care for me would take a big stretch, because there are times I find it hard to love and care for myself. Plus, down through my life, there are so many places where someone has told me I just don't make the grade, for one reason or another. I am too much this, or not enough that; whatever the "this" or "that" might be. Such comments stick with a person. They box a person in. They have the weight of discouragement. They are heartbreaking.

I have looked in the Gospels, and I have not yet found a place where Jesus deals with anyone that way. Oh, there are a few places where, when He speaks truth, it must have hurt — like when He rightly identified people as hypocrites or whitewashed tombs. But as we see Jesus going about His daily rounds and sharing His welcoming message, we see and hear someone whose approach is to build up those who are cast down, to bring to the center those who have been marginalized, to soothe those who are hurting, and to give new purpose to the ones who had given up. So, if you have given up, if you are hurting, if you feel cast down, keep in mind that Jesus came for you. Not just for people like you — Jesus came for you. And He came to love you, and to claim you as His own. You are the person Jesus calls to rejoice.

That would be enough, but there is more to our Scripture passage.

Jesus Christ is the Word in whom all are called to rejoice, Jews and Gentiles. There is no distinction. It probably pained Paul that he had to name them Jew and Gentile. Paul himself was a Jew whose calling was to the Gentiles. He stood in both worlds, and so was a pioneer in the truth he proclaimed. For, having become part of the family of God, these old divisions had come down. The old chasms had been bridged. People discovered that they were

brothers and sisters in the faith. What was once their defining reality was simply background — interesting as the variety and beauty of creation, but not something that would classify, or separate, or categorize.

We tend not to use “Jew” and “Gentile” as terms that separate. Happily, we have moved beyond that. Perhaps it is because we have paid closer attention to Paul in our day? It is hard to say. We cannot transport ourselves back to Roman times and see what kind of an effect his letter had. And there are many places in history where people who claimed Christ as their Lord missed this point entirely — sometimes with horrendous results. Please, do not let these kinds of barriers be part of your belief. Please hear the truth that Jesus is the Word in whom all are to rejoice. Honor all people for who they could be, in Jesus Christ. Jesus is Lord and Savior, in whom all are called to rejoice.

When we hold this shared truth in our hearts, and as we speak this one truth upon our many lips, we are in harmony one with the other. Our hearts beat in tempo. Our words blend as one. As the beloved hymn says: “All Christly souls are one in Him, throughout the whole wide earth.” And so, all are one in Christ.

The call to discipleship is a call to welcome, to invite, to share. How do you make people welcome? Do you give them your full attention? Do you let them know that you see them, and like what you see? Do you set them at ease, as much as possible? Do you provide a place for them, in your heart and in your life? And how do you invite them to be part of the great company of believers? Do you say, “Here is what Jesus has done for me; and He can do it for you, too. I know He will”? Do you say, “Here is someone who knows everything about you, and loves you more than you can guess”? The call to Christian living is a call to draw people closer to God. And the only way to do that is to draw people closer to you.

So, what does it mean to have the Word of God written on our heart? You and I both know there are words and thoughts that you know by heart. You may have taken great pains to memorize them. Back when our parents and grandparents were in school, there was a lot more stock set on memorization than there is now. If someone were to have memorized, say, Portia’s speech from *The Merchant of Venice*, then ever thereafter they would know by heart that the quality of mercy is not strained, and, therefore, would have a window into the landscape of mercy.

So it is with all great messages that we take pains to memorize. To know them by heart means they are part and parcel of us. It is hard to know where the message begins and where we end. When we have God’s Word written on our hearts, then we know, without a doubt, the central verities that are unshakable even when all of life is going awry.

I recall hearing about a prisoner of war who, in the long days of unspeakable confinement, drew upon what he had memorized as a child in the Sunday school class at his church. What he knew by heart got him through the very worst of times. “Memory work,” we sometimes call it. So, let us also say that “memory work” works. And there is more.

What does it mean to have the law of God on our lips? We can say that, when what is in our heart spills out in speech or in song, suddenly others hear it. Before that, when it was in our heart, it was a tremendous resource for each of our lives. But when the Word of God is on our lips — ah, then it becomes an even more precious resource for all of our lives. To whom do we send out the message? To anyone, anywhere. That is why Shadyside Presbyterian Church makes a commitment to get the Word out. And so it is with every Christian. Your voice matters. Your witness counts. What you say changes hearts and lives for the better.

It was not so long ago that someone here in Pittsburgh figured out something that others had missed. In 2009, while waiting to see the annual Fourth of July fireworks display with friends, graduate student Tom Stepleton noticed something strange about the beacon on the Grant Building. Specifically, he saw it spell out the letter “K.” Stepleton, who was then studying at Carnegie Mellon University, told NPR’s Robert Siegel that his Morse Code may have been rusty, but he had no trouble recognizing the errant “K,” because his sister’s name begins with the letter. But the “K” was not the only problem in the message. There were *more* errors. Instead of “Pittsburgh,” the beacon spelled: “P-I-T-E-T-S-B-K-R-R-H” (as reported on NPR, 2009).

The message of the Grant Building had gotten jumbled. It did not spell out “Pittsburgh” anymore. The building had not moved — it was in the same spot it was since the Roaring Twenties. But the message was wrong.

Maybe that is a message for us also. Could it be that we have to do a spiritual spell check, to double check what we are sending out into the world? Is it possible that we have garbled the message so that it is hard to recognize? It is possible. After all, we are not spelling out Pittsburgh. We are spelling out Jesus Christ. Amen.