

“Preaching Nothing”
Romans 8:28-39
4th Sunday of Easter (Confirmation)

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Westminster, Greenville
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In the first congregation I served, there was a member named Doug.

Doug was the nicest guy in the world, a very kind person, a very gentle soul...but he had difficulties with—how shall I put it—with grooming.

- He didn't always smell the best, his appearance was shabby, and he wore the same tattered suit to church every Sunday.
- He had spent too many years drinking, and even though he had gotten sober, everything wasn't so neat.
- His speech, his thought...it was sometimes hard to follow.

Nicest guy in the world, but he looked a MESS.

Sadly, Doug died while I was at that church. And at the funeral, a nephew of his spoke. The first thing his nephew did was to inform the congregation that back in an earlier day, before any of us had ever met him, Doug was a Boy Scout. Then the nephew went through the list of qualities that a Scout is supposed to exemplify, stating that these twelve characteristics—by the end of his life, at least—

really described his uncle Doug.

Any Boy Scouts, or former Scouts in this room?
You know the list, right?

Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, _____ and the nephew paused after the word “brave,”...

and he said, “Well, 11 out of 12 ain't bad!”

You know what #11 is, right?
Clean.

It was a funny thing to say, and a very APPROPRIATE thing to say at Doug's funeral.

You know what else was an appropriate thing to say at Doug's funeral?

*“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Not Doug's alcoholism, not his previously self-destructive behavior, not his slowing mental capacity, not his messiness...none of it would ever separate him from the love of God made known in Christ.

That's what it meant for Doug to be a member of God's Church.

I remembered Doug today...not only because of our text, but because of our topic. The question that I would like for all of us to consider this morning.

What does it mean to be a member of God's Church?

It's an appropriate question on this occasion because today is Confirmation Sunday. A day when we recognize and honor the 38 teenagers who have spent the past 4 months studying this very question.

Under the excellent instruction and guidance of Mary Kathleen Duncan, with help from Lauren Hood, these confirmands have asked themselves what it means to claim the Christian faith as their own, what it means to make a commitment to Christ and to Westminster Presbyterian Church.

In just a bit, they will stand before us, and they will answer FOUR QUESTIONS. It's those four questions that I would like to explore with all of you right now, because they SHED LIGHT on what it means to be a member of God's Church.

Question number one:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

Question number two:

Who is your Lord and Savior?

Those two questions are about BELIEVING. That's the first thing that it means to be a member of God's Church. It doesn't mean you can't have doubts, or ought never to have questions.

It DOES mean that we believe particular things about God, about Jesus, about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Let me get at it like this.

I spent a couple days at Montreat recently, and when you're in Black Mountain and driving along the road that leads right to the Montreat campus...you pass a number of churches. One of those churches has a sign out front.

The sign says: "Love Beyond Belief".

Now...it's certainly possible to love other people without believing in God or believing that Jesus is Lord and Savior in your life.

But being a member of Westminster means believing that Jesus IS Lord and Savior in your life. It's not love beyond belief.

It's believing that OUR love falls short, that OUR love is often self-interested and shallow, but we don't have to depend on OUR love to make it through this life.

We believe that every day, we are utterly dependent on the love of God, and that the clearest expression, the truest revelation of God's love came to us in Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son of God.

We believe that the love of God made known in Christ is more powerful than anything that the world can throw our way—including the powers of evil and sin, mentioned in the first question, and from which the confirmands, in their first question, are asked to turn away.

I love those first two questions.

Do you know where they come from?

They come from the first century, the earliest days of the Church.

Back in the first century, when the Church was just getting started, before there was a Nicene Creed or an Apostles' Creed, the first Christian creed was three simple words:

Jesus is Lord.

That's what you said if you were a Christian.

But it wasn't always a popular thing to say.

As one scholar puts it:

“It is hard for us in America...to understand what it was like for Christians in the [Roman Empire] in those days.

“We have to try to imagine Rome: the Colosseum...the Forum, the palaces...[the military might].

“We have to remember that the emperor was more than a king; he was a kind of god, requiring worship, sacrifice, and absolute loyalty. The Roman creed was *Kurios Kaisar*, ‘Caesar is Lord.’”¹

In other words, saying Jesus is Lord back in those days could get a Christian killed, because those Christians were saying—Caesar is NOT Lord.

Caesar is not the one who rules my life.

The love of God made known in Jesus Christ is what’s in charge of my life.

It was a RADICAL, dangerous, rebellious thing to believe.
So what about today?

Confirmands...I know you’re out there this morning...is that still a radical, rebellious thing to believe?

I think I’d like to talk to just the Confirmands right now. The rest of you can listen in if you want, but Confirmands—where are you?

Raise your hand if you’re a part of the Confirmation class...here’s what I want you to consider:

We don’t live in Ancient Rome, we don’t have a Caesar.

But we do have other things in our lives that we’re tempted to treat as Lord.

¹ From Fleming Rutledge’s sermon, “Not Ashamed of the Gospel,” in her book, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007.

What are the parts of our society that are tempting for you to give allegiance to? In other words, what is it in our culture that wants your time and your energy and your money and your attention?

Is it social media?

Is it getting into the best college?

Is it athletic achievement?

Is it making money?

Is it all those voices that say you're not good enough, unless you wear these clothes or live in this kind of house or unless you're a part of this kind of crowd?

Whatever it is—when you say that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, what you're saying today is that NONE of those things will be Lord in your life, because Jesus is Lord.

Because the love of God is what rules your life.

And that doesn't just affect what you believe.

It affects how you behave.

That's the SECOND thing that I think being a member of God's Church is about: BEHAVING.

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

It's a question about behavior.

And when I say it means behaving, I'm not talking about following rules. I'm talking about following Jesus, about behaving the way Jesus behaved.

I'm talking about making sure that those on the margins,
the hurting, the suffering,
the lonely, the outsiders, the ignored...
making sure that no child of God is being left out.

Let me get at it like this.

There are several wonderful stories about the great, yet incredibly humble, Ignace Yan Paderewski, the Polish composer, who died in 1941. He was a brilliant musician, played the piano.

One evening he was scheduled to perform at a great concert hall. In the audience of black tuxedos and long evening gowns was a mother with her fidgety nine-year old son.

She brought him in hopes that her boy would be encouraged to practice the piano if he could just hear the immortal Paderewski. So, against his own wishes, he had come.

But before the concert began, as the mother turned to talk with her friends, this child slipped from her side, and without anyone in the audience noticing, the boy sat down at the stool on the concert stage.

Staring wide-eyed at the black and white keys, he put his small fingers upon the keyboard.

He began to play "Chopsticks."

The conversation and noise of the crowd was hushed by hundreds of frowning faces turned in his direction. An angered audience began jeering at the boy, booing and hissing for him to be taken from the stage.

Backstage, the master overheard the sounds out front and quickly put together what was happening. Hurriedly, he grabbed his coat and rushed toward the stage. Without one word of announcement, he stooped over the boy, reached around both sides and began to improvise a counter melody to harmonize and enhance the tune. As the two of them played together, Paderewski kept whispering in the boy's ear:

***"Keep going. Don't quit son.
Keep on playing.
Don't quit.
I'm right here..."***²

Confirmands...what would it look like in your life right now,
in your circle of friends or on your team or at your school,
to make sure that the person whom everybody else
is just fine joking about, or isolating or shaming...

what would it look like for you
to make sure that person knows that they
are NOT forgotten or lost or feeling left out?

I think THAT would be a great way to answer the third question,
not just inside these walls but outside these walls.

Now...confirmands, you can take a brief break.
I'm going to talk to everyone else, and if you want listen in, you
can do so.

Everyone else, quick review:

What does it mean to be a member of God's church?
Believing.

Second thing?
Behaving.

² I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for making me aware of this story, which appeared on www.day1.org in a sermon preached 11-27-11, "Two Minute Warning," by The Rev. Dr. Russell Levinson, Jr. Subsequent research on the Internet modified the story and provided my response to it.

Here's the third thing it means:
 BELONGING.³

The last question that our Confirmands will answer goes like this:

“Will you devote yourself to the church’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers?”

Confirmands—sorry, your break is over.

When you say “I will” in response to this question, you are saying something very important:

You belong to something much greater than yourself.

You belong to a community of faith that promises to always look out for you, to take care of you, AND that needs you as we live into God’s future.

But even more than that, it means you belong to God.

Look, if you forget every word from this sermon, there’s ONE WORD I hope you never forget.

You know what that word is?

Nothing.

Nothing is one of the most important words in the Bible.

Because nothing can ever separate you from God’s love.

If you make a mistake, and do something you later come to regret, will that mistake separate you from God’s love? No...

³ I am indebted to a member of one of my former churches, Marisu Fenton, for years ago sharing these three qualities of church membership with me, which she quoted from a sermon she heard from a previous pastor, Roger Quillin.

If you turn your back on God, and decide that all this God and Jesus stuff isn't for you...will that separate you from God's love?

No...

If something unexpected happens to you, and you have to go through a challenging and difficult time in your life, will that challenging and difficult time keep God's love from coming to you?

No.

The heart of the gospel is this:

Nothing can separate you from God's love.

Getting back to the great composer Paderewski...I had never heard of Paderewski until I read that story about the boy playing chopsticks, so I looked him up. Paderewski was a remarkable individual. He lost his mother at an early age, lost his first wife. So much sadness...and yet, he became this great composer, this wonderful musician.

But in the course of the research, I was disappointed to learn that the "chopsticks" story, about the little boy at the concert—may not, in fact, be true.

At least, no one knows.

There is no concrete evidence that it ever took place.

I was disappointed about that—until I came here today.

And I saw our confirmands, before worship, working with Mary Kathleen and Lauren to go over what will happen in this service. And I thought about all the work they put into getting here, and the love that you, as their parents, have put into raising them in the Christian

faith...and perhaps grandparents, who passed the faith to those parents who have shown that faith to these confirmands...

Well, it was all the evidence I needed—evidence that the love of God is indeed at work in God’s Church and in this world.

And I realized that there was another story, a better story than the chopsticks story, a more important story going on right now, in this room.

It’s a story about Jesus Christ:
 claiming you in his love,
 calling you to share that love,
 promising that nothing—
ABSOLUTELY NOTHING—
 will ever be able to separate you from God’s love.

Keep going.

Don’t quit.

I can make beautiful music out of what you do...

That’s not Paderewski.

That’s Jesus.

He’s talking to ALL of you...

Amen.