

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
Sunday, April 11, 2010

John 20:19–31
Acts 5: 27–32

DOUBT IS PART OF FAITH, NOT A LACK OF FAITH

I wonder if any of us in this room are old enough to remember when you would go to the house of the person you were going to pick up for a date, you would knock on the door, and you would walk in and be introduced. And before you could leave, you would be asked, “Exactly what are your intentions?”

Remember how that question was valid? It was direct, but it was still an accepted way to begin a conversation about what was going to happen that evening. Usually the question, “What are your intentions?” was a polite way to address a young suitor who came to escort your child on a date. Now I’m guessing that even in cultures and traditions that are much stricter than the current moral climate of our world—even in those systems where the code is heavily protected and children are admonished on a regular basis to remain pure—even there, I’m guessing, not one mother or father ever heard *this answer* to that question, “Well, I must obey God rather than any human authority.”

I’m sure no suitor ever said, “My intentions are to love God with all my heart, to study hard and get a good job, and try to make your child happy.” In response, I’m sure the questions were received, and the answer was light and shallow.

Not so with the apostles, who were in essence asked their intentions by the council and the high authorities. “Why are you filling Jerusalem with this teaching?” They don’t even want to mention the name Jesus. And even worse, “Why are you telling the crowds that his crucifixion, his blood, is on all our hands?” Even those who are supposed to be our religious leaders, who stand closest to our Lord—even they (we) are guilty.

Every church loves at some point to go through the process of writing down its mission statement—its central guiding theme. I wonder if the next time we feel so compelled to put pen to paper, if we’ll put on that paper something like this: *Our purpose is to teach Jesus as Lord, and we are in the constant process of overcoming our sinful instincts. We are trying to serve Jesus.* Or to put in totally incorrect, improper, offensive political terms today, I wonder if we would even consider how we understand and proclaim salvation to one another. The most popular evangelical and demonstrative among us often know exactly how they are to communicate God’s plan for salvation. And we’ve probably heard it or read it or seen it, or even been taught that this is the correct way we come into a relationship with God. First, we recognize our sin. Second we recognize Jesus came to put that problem of sin right—that Jesus is the answer. And then we repent and are saved.

There’s a problem with this interpretation of the Good News. It begins with us. And it sounds a little more like Thomas than we should really be proclaiming. It begins with us, and so God’s love is contingent on our behaving appropriately.

Back to that question, “What are your intentions?” *Do you understand the right words to repeat? Before I give you permission to go out the door with my child, do you know what I expect?* The primary message of the Bible is not that we are bad; Jesus fixed that, so now we won’t be punished. The primary message of the Bible is that we have been given life in God’s written word and in His incarnate word in Jesus. God has given us a life that includes hope; a life that has the potential for happiness; yes ... and love.

The most tangible expression of this gift of life is Jesus Christ. And so when we are considering the essence of our faith and what we live each day, it’s less about the doubts and the questions, and it’s more about the simple and clear affirmation that Jesus is Lord. Because Jesus is Lord, we have been inspired to want him as our savior. And he is. As our savior revealed—we are inspired to become whole as we recognize how empty it is to live only for ourselves. All disobedience, all of our sinfulness comes from that inappropriate love of our selves. Idolatry of our own lives is the source of unhappiness in this world.

So the next time you have questions about this congregation’s intentions, I want you to remember a riddle. It’s an easy riddle and it’s a favorite of Warren Buffett. The question is: How many legs does a dog have if you call a tail a leg? And the answer is: Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg.

Calling ourselves Christians does not make us Christians. The gospel is about Jesus. The church is about Jesus. Because this is not only our core belief, but our redefining essence—because Jesus is in our attempts, our intentions are turned into something oriented outward about loving and about an appropriate love and respect for ourselves, and about living that love in community. Notice it’s not about becoming one another’s saviors. Salvation is the work of Christ, not ours. It is his to give to the world, not ours to withhold. And he has already decided that God’s saving love is to be offered to everyone, and our singular guiding truth is that Christ has changed our lives for the better—we are no longer enslaved to self. This is the most important lesson of all the lessons we will teach our children. And it is upon the truth of this lesson that all other truth relies: Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives, of our church, and of our world.

Let us be clear who we are and what we are about.
Amen.