

“Confess & Believe”

Sermon Preached by Lowell D. Nelson  
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We are in the midst of the Pentecost season, this season of growth. There are little visual cues, green for life, even in the midst of this desert heat. And wherever you may be viewing from, whether in the upper Midwest or near this beautiful sanctuary, I'm thankful for this message today, a story that we have heard before. John Ortberg, a pastor, wrote a book, “If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat,” and that is a cute way to say that the life of faith, of confessing our need for the Lord, of confessing the truth about life, and then believing and trusting in the Lord, is sometimes tricky or dangerous business. My encouragement for today is going to come from the Scripture itself about that God is with us. The presence of God is with us and giving you the punchline, it's not so much the strength of Peter keeping his eyes on Jesus. It is the absolute brilliance of Jesus keeping his eyes on us, none of us being caught away from the Lord with the Lord's intensity of coming to him. It is Jesus looking at each one of us, this incredible presence through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the beauty of creation, this amazing understanding. It's Jesus looking at each one of us, allows us to live our life in faith.

There's an intimacy to living life with God. Sometimes I struggle to communicate that this isn't a test. This is God's life story for you and I. We are part of this amazing large story of life that's found in the Scriptures, that's found in the beauty of creation, that's found in the life of Christ. It's found in our own living together as the people of God, and Psalm 85 says it this way, “I will listen to what the Lord God is saying.” What a beautiful introduction, to listen, to accept this amazing gift known as the Bible, and these beautiful phrases. These are some of my favorite phrases out of Psalm 85, “Steadfast love and faithfulness have met together. Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” I just love that intimacy of language there, of that kissing or bringing together with holy intent, that the Lord is with us. Righteousness shall be go before the Lord and shall prepare for God's pathway. God's presence is with us even when we feel alone or away. That is the human condition. We are not called to be 100% consistent. I would love that for myself, to always have this consistency of faith in God, but the tumults of life and the challenges of our environment and the interplay with other human beings and our own complexities of how we view life and our history and our fears, all of this leads to inconsistency, but may we never project our inconsistencies on the consistency of God's love.

The reading for today from Romans 10, “The word is near you on your lips and in your heart.” This is the confession. This is the statement of faith. 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. Saved means healed, and it's not a litmus test. Did you do that once? Have you done it yet? Have you

really done it well? It is an ongoing invitation to live your life in such a way to confess that Jesus is Lord, Lord, the ruler of my life, inconsistent as I may be. It's absolutely consistent that Jesus expresses his Lordship in my life and that God has raised him from the dead heals my life, because I never need to be fearful about my own death or the death of others. Yes, the disruption to life breaks my heart, but it doesn't break my spirit, because I know of the Lord's love for eternity and for each and every one of us. So, one who believes with the heart so is justified. Justified means made right, not by what we have done but by what God has done through Christ, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. So, not a statement of legal intent; a statement of a way of living, of being healed, saved, salvation like salve. It's the spiritual healing that allows us to live, and this Lord is Lord of all. This consistency, not our consistency but the Lord's consistency, Lord of all and generous to all who call upon him. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved as Paul repeats here from Scripture itself.

It takes an intentional focus to live as a person of faith. It doesn't mean a special burden. It just means that proclamation doesn't come from just thinking about the Lord once in a while. It's looking for opportunities. That's one of our missional components, to proclaim the love of God in Jesus Christ, and so this last paragraph Romans 10 is so beautiful, "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?" and "How are they to believe in one whom they have not heard of?" and "How are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" and "How are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?" It's a mission. We are missionaries. We are called to proclaim this great love of Jesus Christ. Faith comes through hearing, and that is an invitation for you and I to proclaim this. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news? That's from Isaiah but brought forward into Romans to speak how each one of us is part of this consistency of God's love for all.

So, we get to the Gospel text itself, and Peter once again is in the story, Peter who is known as, of course, Saint Andrew, but talked about by Jesus as the rock, on this faith he will build the church, once again steps into the challenge of life itself, the life of being one of faith. I sometimes wonder how it is that we can be so inconsistent in our faith that we think of Jesus as every once in a while when we think of him. I am so thankful that God thinks of us through Christ each and every moment, so my inconsistency is dwarfed by the consistency of God's love. Here comes Jesus, and he comes forward in a way that scares these battered sailors that have been on the sea. They see him on the water. They are absolutely flabbergasted, and this is what Jesus says, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." This is not for that one storm. This is for life. Be encouraged. It is I. The Greek absolutely parallels the Hebrew Yahweh, the great I am. This is God's presence, right in the midst of life. Do not be afraid. Oh, how I wish I could be consistent upon this simple phrase, take heart to be encouraged and know that God's presence is with me right now and right with you right now, because God's consistency never fails, and do not be afraid but to live life full of this thing called faith. Luther said it in this way, faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times. It's not because I've mustered something up; it's because I understand that God's love is fully focused on me, is fully focused on you, is fully focused on all, and this gives me the encouragement to live. So as Peter gets out of this boat, taking steps, notices the strong wind, loses focus, begins to sink,

he says something that's very confessional, "Lord save me." That is the deepest invitation for you and I in this season of Pentecost. It is absolutely right and appropriate that we can lift this up on a daily basis. Lord heal me, Lord save me, turn your countenance upon me, look at me Lord with your love, and as I drift and as I discern how to respond in gracious ways, God, I just know that you will save me.

The word, "immediately", is used here, and I give great thanks to God for that. This phrase "ye of little faith, why did you doubt?" is that word, the Greek word is used six times in the New Testament. That is us, but little faith is enough when it's faith in Jesus Christ, when our gaze is towards the one who always is lovingly gazing upon us. When I mentioned John Ortberg's book, "If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat," unfortunately he had made a serious lapse in judgment and has left ministry. This just happened and that hurt my heart when I know a man of faith loses his way, but he said it this way. He said that this description of failure, and one could say that for Peter, you know that he failed, it isn't the failure that defines you. It's how you respond to failure that defines you, and we are people who respond to failure. The cross itself appeared to be failure, that Jesus died, until we understand that failure is actually the greatest response ever. Eternal life, all sin forgiven, taken upon Jesus, and his resurrection, a story that would be unbelievable except through the eyes of faith to see that God's failure is actually success for us and for this world, and so as I pray for Pastor Ortberg and his reconciliation with the congregation and with the world, I wanted to say that to you that failure is part of living. Failure is part of our journey to support and love one another. Salvation is a dynamic process. Healing comes in all different places in which the character of God, in all its fullness, is at work. This statement that this dynamic process, that the character got in all his fullness work, is from Dr. Leanne Van Dyk from Columbia Theological Seminary. The character of God, that's what I want to emphasize today. Keep focused on God's gaze upon you, this beautiful character that allows us to step forward in faith.

The last encouragement I have for you is that as you discern God's call in your life and you see the failures that you have made, sometimes I wonder about living in a retirement community area where we've lived many, many years with many regrets, and yet I say to you that these regrets are difficult if the way we respond to them is to strive in our own being or to try to repress those memories, but when we give them and confess the truth, "Lord save me." we have this opportunity to gaze in the loving eyes of Christ and to be fully forgiven and to live with belief, with trust in a world that is so cynical, we will be counter-intuitive as people of faith. So, for today, confess and believe it is not a test. It's a way to live. Jesus, save us. Jesus, we have faith in you and in all our inconsistencies, in all of our struggles. We know that you are looking upon us and immediately reach out with love. Praise be to God.