

Sermon, *Blessing to Others*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 3.9.25

Have you heard of the Romans Road? It is a way to walk an unbeliever through St. Paul's Letter to the Romans that leads to making a confession that Jesus is Lord. It starts with reading in chapter 3 that God is love. Then, in chapter 6: we are sinners and the wages of sin are death. There is nothing we can do in ourselves to save ourselves (chapter 5). And then, from today's reading (Romans 10:8-13), "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." The unbeliever is then asked to make that confession with their lips. They are then proclaimed as saved.

This is not a part of our Episcopal tradition, but theologically, we agree that God is love, we have sinned, we need help from God to rescue us, and that we can confess and believe in our heart. We'd also say that it is only through God's grace that we are saved – it's not with our words or perhaps even with our actions, but with God's undeserved and overflowing grace.

What I experienced in High School was that various students would be led down the Romans Road and confess, as stated above. But their lives didn't look any different from one day to the next. Our Anglican tradition would state that one's life should look like what one confesses with one's lips (and thus our need to ask God for forgiveness because we have not done as we ought to, and we have done what we ought not to). The difference for me has to do with where one's heart is – some believe the important part is to say the words and believe inside while others believe one's life should resemble what one believes.

We all know we have a heart, and it is in the upper left hand side of our chest cavity. The thing is, "heart" in Paul's day, when he wrote the letter to the Romans, was not so much about the organ in our chest that circulates blood; instead, the "heart" is something that is visible on the outside by our words and actions. Remember when Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Again, it's pointing to visible behavior of how we act and speak.

"If you believe with your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead."

Jewish spirituality back in Paul's day acknowledged that right thinking creates right actions. If a rabbi could teach the people what is right, they will then do their best to act right. We don't first act right and then our mind thinks it; nope, the body follows the mind. Thus, if you believe that God raised Jesus from the dead you will behave and act differently than others. The Roman Empire, in Jesus's day, used death as the ultimate threat. They controlled who lives, or more to the point, who dies. But, the followers of Jesus, who believed with their (external) heart that Jesus was raised from the dead by God also believed that they will be raised by God, like Jesus, when death comes. Suddenly, the main tool of the Roman Empire no longer worked. Followers of Jesus were not afraid of death! According to the history of the martyrs of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries, Christians were willing to be put to death by Rome for their faith and belief in Christ. They would say, all quite publicly (with their heart) that they died in their baptism and that God will raise them to life eternal with Christ. You could see what they believed by their words and actions.

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord.”

History shows us that every year, in the Roman Empire, people had to make a public profession that Ceasar is Lord. People of the Jewish faith, for the most part, were exempt from that confession; everyone else, however, had to. The sacrifice of the early Christians is that those who worked for the Empire, and claimed Jesus as Lord, would lose their jobs. Some would even lose their life. For the people of the Jewish faith in those early centuries, those who confessed with their lips that Jesus was Lord would sometimes lose the connection to their family, to their community, their customer base, their profession. It was a sacrifice for both, as Paul writes, “Jew and Greek” to confess that Jesus is Lord.

What is our sacrifice today? How is our external heart showing that we believe Jesus was raised from the dead?

On Saturday, All Angels had a booth at the LBK Town Open House. It was our second year in a row with a booth. Last year, it was just David Stasney, our music director, and Bob Erker and me. We had signs up for blessing animals and the New to You Art Sale. This year, we had three members of our bell choir performing with the bells; we had a signage specialist volunteer, four booth volunteers, an extroverted roaming music director inviting everyone he met to our St. Patrick’s Day concert and dinner, and me. We had triple the signage inviting pet blessings and bike blessings. Our booth volunteers went out from under the tent and invited every pet owner and bike rider to stop by for a blessing. They even invited humans for a blessing! Our flyers and signs did very little to explain who we are; instead, we were showing the island what we do.

What is our sacrifice? We had ten people sacrificing their Saturday showing people where our heart is. At All Angels, we bless and pray, we like music, we invite people to fellowship.

We became a blessing for others.

I think if Paul were to write a letter today, to Longboat Key, I think he would invite us to show our belief that God raised Jesus from the dead, and to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord by being blessings to others. I don’t think he’d want us to sit quietly, in a room, and say to ourselves that God raised Jesus from the dead, he would want us to share and invite others to participate in the joy and peace.

We are living in a country where we can confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord without fear of retribution. Thanks be to God. Nevertheless, there is a sacrifice that we are asked to make and that is to invite others and to become a blessing; especially for those who do not yet believe.