

Romans 10:5-15

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because 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. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

This is the Word of the Lord...

What does it mean to confess "Jesus is Lord?"

In the 1940's and early 50's a peculiar child grew up on a small farm without electricity or plumbing. He paid no mind to most of the animals on the farm, but the chickens he held in the highest regard. If the family had chicken for supper, he boycotted the meal.

At the age of 8 he decided God was calling him to be a preacher. And so he'd gather his congregation of chickens in the henhouse and he'd preach them to sleep. The boy had a stammer, but he preached to those chickens so long that he worked the impediment right out of his speech.

Against long odds for a man whose father was a sharecropper, he went to college and graduated from seminary. But his passion to serve God led him away from the pulpit. Instead, he sat at lunch counters and rood a Greyhound bus with white and black people sitting wherever they wanted instead of separate sections of the bus. Now a long-serving member of the House of Representatives, John Lewis was one of the Freedom Riders who pulled into a bus station in Montgomery, Alabama. From Taylor Branch's book, *Parting the Waters*:

John Lewis, selected to speak for the group, stepped first off the parked bus and paused before a semicircle of reporters on the platform. As other reporters rushed up in front of him, and the Freedom Riders filled in behind, Lewis surveyed a terminal area that was familiar to him from scores of bus rides home to nearby Troy, where he had preached to the chickens. Now all the platforms and streets and parking lots were deserted. Aside from the drivers of a few taxis parked in the distance, the only people he could see beyond the reporters were a dozen or so white men hidden in a shadowy entrance to the terminal. Lewis felt an eerie foreboding. "It doesn't look right," he whispered to a companion.

Facing a battery of cameras, microphones, and notepads, Lewis got halfway through an answer to the first press question before falling strangely silent, transfixed by what he saw coming up behind the reporters. Norman Ritter, the Time-Life bureau chief from Atlanta, reacted to Lewis' face by turning to confront the dozen white men who had been standing in the door. He held out both arms to create a boundary for the interview, but the men, brandishing baseball bats, bottles, and lead pipes, pushed past him...

"Let's stand together," said Lewis, as the Freedom Riders retreated backward along the enclosed loading platform. Hemmed against a railing that ran along a retaining wall, they stood helpless as the white men barreled into them. Some of Lewis' group jumped, some were pushed, and some were literally thrown over the railing onto the roofs of cars parked in the Post Office lot below. Those who did not take their luggage with them were soon pelted with their own suitcases. Above, on the platform, reporters who objected, or who tried to take photographs of the attack, were set upon by a small mob whose full fury was now released. The enraged whites smashed *Life* photographer Don Urbrock repeatedly in the face with his own camera. They clubbed Norman Ritter to the ground, beat a Birmingham television reporter, and chased the reporters who escaped...

John Lewis lay unconscious near the retaining wall, felled by a blow from a wooden Coca-Cola crate, and his seminary schoolmate, William Barbee, lay some distance away... Police Commissioner Sullivan arrived with a squadron some ten minutes after the first violence. By then the Freedom Riders were either down or gone, but the milling crowd was still growing by the hundreds, gawking or looking for new targets. Behind Sullivan came Alabama Attorney General Gallion in the company of his assistants and a deputy sheriff. They made their way to John Lewis, who was pointed out to them as a Freedom Rider, and stood over him to read Judge Jones's injunction.ⁱ

What does it mean to confess - "Jesus is Lord."

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul lays out the argument that salvation is for all. His plea is to the Jews who, in Paul's opinion, are seeking to make themselves righteous through the law rather than trusting that their righteousness comes from God alone. *For Christ is the end of the law so there may be righteousness for everyone who believes (10:4).*

The law no longer serves the function of reconciling humans with God. This is a big adjustment to make. The geometry of grace changes from defining who is inside and who is out - to Christ in the center, with no boundaries, showing how far love can go.

It changes the question too. If following the law is what dictates our salvation, then we ask, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

And we're disappointed when the answer is, "Love your God and love your neighbor."

That's too hard. Tight law is easier to follow than Jesus. Lines and boundaries are easier to hold fast to than an endless and boundless love.

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A colleague of ours began her professional life as a nurse. She grew up in churches where women weren't allowed to preach. In her 40's she finally went to seminary in defiance of that particular law.

Her first call was to a church with a middle class, black congregation who drove in on Sundays from the suburbs to the decaying neighborhood where the church was. One of the things she did to connect with neighbors was make the church available for weddings and funerals. At one of those events a woman told an usher that she'd like to speak with the pastor, and she was given a business card with the pastor's contact information on it.

On August 9, 2014 Pastor received a text from an unknown number:

"The police have killed a boy I know. Can you come?"

She tells the story, "I did what any of the rest of you would do. I checked Twitter to see if it was really happening."

It was.

And she waited. She didn't go. She wasn't prepared for this kind of work.

She couldn't be the one that was supposed to respond... could she?

She waited some more.

She prayed.

And she got in her car, and drove the short distance to Ferguson.

Over the last three years the Reverend Traci Blackmon has become a leading voice in social justice issues. She's been to the White House several times, met with the Pope, and she is the Executive Director of Justice and Witness Ministries for the United Church of Christ. It was in that capacity that she was invited to speak on Friday night at St. Paul's Memorial Church in Charlottesville, Virginia. The worship service had been planned for weeks. Ever since the announcement that the alt-right groups were coming to Charlottesville this weekend, the clergy in the area had been planning their peaceful resistance.

I used to wonder what counter-protests do to help a situation. What if you just let the protest run its course, then won't they go away and move their hatred somewhere else? In 2014 the KKK distributed flyers in Camp Hill neighborhoods and the Department of Justice came in to teach the clergy how to handle it. "Silence is the welcome mat of hate," they told us. You have to denounce this level of hate and the propaganda that goes with it. You can't ignore it, or else the hate becomes emboldened. You must stand against it. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel wrote, "Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

The clergy of Charlottesville and the surrounding area were preparing to stand peacefully against hate. They gathered the night before in a worship service proclaiming peace and inspiring those present to bear witness to the love of God and neighbor that we are all called to by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

By now you've seen the pictures of a crowd of young men purposefully dressed in collared shirts so as to look like college students, chanting, "Jews will not replace us" and the Nazi slogan, "Blood and soil." The Sanctuary full of religious and spiritual leaders was surrounded by them. Traci's

Twitter account said: “They are coming for the church. Police all around. They won’t let us go outside. Y’all these KKK are marching with torches!”

The next day she and other clergy walked silently through the streets of Charlottesville, ending their journey at the entrance to the park that was soon to be filled with alt-right, White Supremacist protestors. As Traci spoke to the media she was suddenly pulled away for her own safety, and in the background the clergy were being punched and beaten with brass knuckles and bats.

What does it mean to confess – Jesus is Lord.

In Romans, the Apostle Paul moves from the distinction between mandatory law versus restorative love, to an encouragement to share the Good News. His argument is simple. *How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?*

How can people know about the love of Jesus Christ, if we don’t proclaim him?

Most of us think the proclamation of Jesus Christ is for other people. When we read or hear of prophets and pastors who have made an impact on this world they seem larger than life. But often, when you look deeper at history, so many were taking small steps for justice and the movement of the world magnified those steps. They were and are Christians just like you and me.

Traci Blackmon’s twitter feed and Facebook page are filled with front lines social justice and inspiration. She’s also a human being who’s trying to get healthier – like most of us – and right now she’s trying to cut out soda. Last night – she tweeted:

I prayed. I preached. I prophesied. I cried.

I lament. I rage. I love.

I did not drink soda.

I’ve been reading about the Civil Rights era and one of the things that struck me was that Martin Luther King Jr. was called to the prominent pulpit of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1954. His preaching capabilities grew the church so large that the only way to increase growth would have been to move away from the prestigious but tiny site beneath the state capitol. King knew his congregation wouldn’t do that so instead he decided to step up his activity in the local chapter of the NAACP. A few months later, Rosa Parks got on the bus.ⁱⁱ

Paul’s provocation to evangelism is not just for the chosen few, it’s for all of us; yes, Presbyterians too. My favorite verse is the last one: *How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news?”*

Friends, I don’t need to see your feet, but we do need to get out there and bring Good News. Sometimes bringing Good News is easy. Right now it’s hard.

Right now – proclaiming that the love of Jesus Christ is for everyone – is counter cultural. As members of a mainline denomination we have been equipped – some of us our entire lives – to denounce the idea that Jesus is only for white people.

The Scriptures we have been raised in speak of healing, feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, visiting the prisoner, welcoming the stranger. Jesus dies for peace, and resurrects in the name of love. Violence is wrong.

Violence by neo-Nazi's – the far right – is wrong.
Violence by the anti-fascists – the far left – is wrong.

The Confessions we have been raised in speak of peace, reconciliation, justice, and freedom among nations. The Confession of 1967 states: *the church which identifies the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays its calling* (9.45b).

This includes the Aryan Nation.

From the Belhar Confession:

[We] reject any doctrine which... sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

We believe... that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interest and thus control and harm others.

As Christians, we should be chilled by the number of crosses and other Christian emblems worn by the Neo-Nazis yesterday. And we can't just turn away and shake our heads and only say to our friends that we know agree with us how terrible it all is. We have to be willing to risk friendships and even family relationships in order to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The hymn we sang earlier speaks to these realities. The text was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man imprisoned and executed by Nazi Germany at the age of 39.

Our brothers and sister have been handed a cup filled to brimming with bitter suffering, and as Christians we are called to take it as well, thankfully and without trembling.

What does it mean to confess Jesus is Lord?

It means naming racism as a sin. It means calling out those around you on that sin. It means saying 'no' out loud to an off color joke or a demeaning comment.

What does it mean to confess Jesus is Lord?

It means worshiping Jesus and following his command to love our neighbors with no caveat on the color of our neighbors' skin or the God they must follow or clothing they must wear.

What does it mean to confess Jesus is Lord?

It's calling what we saw Friday night and Saturday what it is – white supremacy. And making clear that white nationalism does NOT reflect the love ethic of the faithful. Hate is NOT a Christian value.

It's hard work.

It's good work.

It's God's work.

As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Taylor Branch. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*. Simon & Schuster:1988. pp. 445-6, 448.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 124.