

“Does Theology Matter?”
Texts: Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Romans 10:14-17
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“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?” Romans 10:14a

A little over two years ago, just after I was ordained in this sanctuary, I received a book from a good friend of mine who is a retired United Methodist minister. The title of the book is *10 Things Your Minister Wants to Tell You: (But Can't Because He Needs the Job)*. It is a witty and entertaining book, but in the preface the author makes it clear that his intentions are not purely lighthearted. He writes, “This book is written for all the people who want to live lives of purpose and meaning without having to put their brains in their pockets. It’s written for steeple dropouts who grew up on organized religion as well as the millions who rise each Sunday to recite ancient creeds about virgin births and bodily resurrections, all the while feeling just a tad unconvinced.”ⁱ

I think the author is on to something. I think it is true that a large number of seminary-educated Christian ministers do often choose to leave the serious and deep questions of faith and God on the cutting room floor as we prepare our sermons. Perhaps this *is* because we need the job; certainly that is a factor. But I think our intentions are somewhat nobler. For the sake of brevity, we can divide these noble intentions into two camps.

The first set has to do with pastoral sensitivity. It goes something like this: the real purpose of a sermon is to encourage and care for the people of your church. Choosing to take on deep and tricky theological issues in the sermon might alienate members and visitors who simply and exclusively need to be reminded that they are loved unconditional. The theology of scholars like John Calvin, Karl Barth, and Reinhold Neibuhr is, quite simply, “over the heads” of many parishioners and not appropriate for those in the pews. Just give them the blessed assurance that Jesus is theirs and send them out refreshed and grateful.

The second set of intentions has to do with ethical engagement in the world. It goes something like this: the real purpose of a sermon is to call people of faith to pursue justice and peace in the world. Sermons that focus on theology or even scriptural texts do so at the cost of neglecting the missional demands of faith. Christians who come to worship need to be sent back out with a “to do list” of ways that they can apply what they have heard and make a difference in the world. Theology too often obscures the real world consequences of belief and can even turn good, ethical, passionate people away from organized religion. Just give them the petitions and protest signs and set them loose charged up and eager.

Neither of these approaches to preaching is entirely without merit. God *does* love us unconditionally and we certainly need to be reminded of that as often as possible. God *does* call us to work in the world for justice and mercy and peace, and we need to be reminded of that as well. But missing from both of them is the central character of our

faith—God! *Who* is this one who loves us without condition? *Who* is this one who calls us to active faith in the world? These are the questions that weigh most heavily on many of us and are most often ignored.

If the theology of Christians in recent years has become anemic, it should come as no surprise. Paraphrasing the rhetorical question Paul asked the Christians in Rome, “how are they to believe in one of whom they rarely hear about in worship?” How are they to call on one of whom they have never heard?

Paul is writing to a divided church and he is writing to Christians with divided allegiances. The unity and the future of the church are at stake as he puts his pen to parchment and begins his letter. The unity and future of the church have been at stake ever since. The crisis in Paul’s time centered on how people of radically different backgrounds and viewpoints could possibly share the same God. Jews, with their radical monotheistic belief, their elaborate and intricate set of holy laws, their heritage as the chosen people of the one true God. Gentiles, with their enduring love for philosophy and wisdom, their commitment to many gods, and their ancient and rich cultural history. Two entirely different perspectives on faith and religion.

But Paul believed that, in Jesus Christ, God had destroyed the walls that separated these two peoples and created a new humanity. No longer Jew or Greek, only one redeemed, called, chosen human race. One faith, one Lord, one baptism. It was a revolutionary, world-changing theology. The only problem for Paul was that Christian converts were not living out what he knew to be true. They were divided. The problem was the same in every corner of the early Christian movement. And so, Paul chooses to write to the Christians living in the center of the ancient world. His reasoning might have gone something like this: if a united church can thrive in Rome, it can survive anywhere. And so, with the future and unity of the church hanging in the balance, Paul went to work on his letter. The stakes could not have been higher for the church.

The letter he wrote would become the most influential document in the history of the church. But what interests me most about the letter to the Romans, which I love more than any book in the Bible, is what Paul does not write. First, he does not recite some trite slogan about the importance of unity, a kind of *can’t we all just get along* speech. But he also does not begin with a list of practical ethical suggestions for life in community when you disagree—a self-help primer on living with difficult people.

Instead, Paul responds to crisis with theology. He writes about God: who God is and what God has done. The letter to the Romans is a heavy and important theological reflection on the God who has called us in Jesus Christ to live as one body. Paul does not skim the surface. He goes deep. He delves into the ancient holy texts of the Jewish tradition and explains the role of the law. He describes the ways in which the power of sin has taken over the world in which we live, exercising dominion over individual humans and the whole created cosmos. Paul writes about God. He re-aligns the theological universe with God at the center, and moves humanity out of the limelight. He focuses on the difficult questions of faith. What is so powerful about this letter is that Paul takes seriously both the content of his writing **and** the community to which he writes. He respects the Romans enough to

share with them his deepest and firmest beliefs. He tackles questions of salvation, justification, grace, and providence.

These are uncomfortable topics for we modern, educated, sophisticated Christian believers. It is so much easier to speak of the enduring power of the human spirit or the virtues of freedom and justice than it is to give voice to our theology. Most of us would rather do almost anything than share our convictions about God. We go to great lengths to avoid actually talking about the God whom we worship. And we pastors are the guiltiest of this blatant avoidance, scheduling programs and dinners and activities and mission projects but rarely sharing the *why* behind all these important and even vital ministries. How are they to call on one whose name doesn't appear on the church calendar of events? Where is the God-talk in our churches? The crisis the American church faces in 2010, in my humble opinion, is not primarily a crisis of lost members, shrinking budgets, or diminishing influence. Behind all of these serious concerns is a crisis of depth. By removing deep theology from the life of the church, and replacing it with paper-thin spirituality or zeal for justice as defined only by political goals, we are digging up our very foundation. Paul responded to crisis with theology. Perhaps we should do the same. Wouldn't it be something if Christian believers all over the world, or in this congregation, began to share with one another the heart of our faith. We would understand one another better. We would understand ourselves better. We would understand God better. It could be so powerful.

In recent years, no one has written more eloquently or urgently of the need for serious theological reflection in the church than Tom Long, who is the Bandy Professor of Preaching at the Candler School of Theology and who was our guest preacher here in January. Dr. Long's new book, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, is a powerful call for a revival in preaching and in the Protestant mainline church. At the heart of this revival is the great commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul, and your neighbor as yourself. The kind of love that Jesus advocated requires depth of commitment and depth of understanding. Long writes, "A Christ whose resurrection occurs only in our minds has no right to call us to put our bodies on the line for justice. But a risen Christ whose body still bears the marks of the wounds will send Christians passionately, even joyfully, marching across the bridge at Selma, hammering shingles on Habitat for Humanity houses, and changing bedpans in an AIDS hospice."ⁱⁱⁱ

Without deep faith and some firm theological foundation, the world and life in it will eventually beat us down. That is why we come here, to meet a God who pulls us into the waters of uncertainty and challenge and commitment, beyond comfort zone and dogmatic certainty to deep pools of faith.

Christian believers like you and me are going to have to spend some time with Holy Scripture because the faith we confess is built on the words we read there. We are going to have to spend some time considering the identity of this God whom we worship and serve, because the God we worship makes all the difference in the life we live. What sets the church apart from political movements or ideological-centered campaigns is not our practice. It is our theology. It is the God who is always behind and beyond what we do, both within and outside these walls. If we lose this centering and foundational truth, that it

is about God and not us, then our churches will become social clubs and our worship merely a religious show.

For thousands of years, the words Mary has read from the Book of Deuteronomy have been recited and memorized and spoken aloud by people of Jewish faith. The *Shema* is a consistent and constant reminder: this is the God whom we worship. This is what our God does and who our God is. The Hebrew people were commanded to repeat these words many times each day, to bind them as a sign on their hands and on their doorposts. They were commanded to teach these powerful words to their children. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And this deep theological affirmation formed a community of faith whose commitment to God has spanned millennia and more persecution than any of us could imagine. The theology held when everything else came apart.

So, yes, theology matters. What we believe about God is of critical importance to who we are as a community of faith.

There is one more question to consider. What do we believe? Several months ago, at the Men of Morningside's Theology on Tap program, we had a spirited conversation about Christian Fundamentalism. At the end of the evening, I invited the men to consider this question: what are the fundamentals of your faith? What are those aspects of your belief system that you could never compromise? Try it some time; it is a fascinating exercise. After a moment to think through the question, I asked for volunteers to share their fundamentals. What emerged from the group was a stunning communal affirmation of faith. The responses were universally profound and deeply personal. The waters of theological reflection were so deep I had to stand on tiptoe. One of the final answers given was this: "I fundamentally believe that God is still active in the world." No phrase could have better summarized my theology at that moment. Here was a group of thirty very modern men, who could otherwise be described as normal, sharing ideas and beliefs that did not come from the surrounding culture but from their faith in something bigger and more significant.

Whatever else we say about Christian theology, this might just be enough: God is still active in the world. God still speaks. God still calls. God still cares. God still moves among us.

Such deep truths do matter. In fact, they are sturdy enough to stake your life on. Amen.

ⁱ Oliver "Buzz" Thomas, *10 Things Your Minister Wants to Tell You: (But Can't, Because He Needs the Job)*, St. Martin's Press, 2007, pp. xvii-xviii.

ⁱⁱ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 108.