**Sermon Text for Sunday July 7, 2013**

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 130, John 11:17-27

“Do you believe this?”

Welcome First Presbyterian to a hot celebration of our Savior Jesus Christ. What a great Sunday it is to be together as we celebrate communion, as we consecrate the memorial garden, as we open the windows to remind us that we are integral part of the community just as the community is an integral part of us. We are unified in so many ways with each other and with those around us. We see ourselves in this church as believers and we are. Our belief is founded on our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So we call ourselves a family and it is not our genetics that draw us together, but rather our commitment to Jesus Christ and this commitment has invaded our lives.

We gather this Sunday because we believe. Both of our Scriptures define that belief and speak about what impact that belief has upon our lives. Let’s read.

**READ**

Last Sunday a couple of us from church went to hear Tony Campolo speak at the Ocean City Tabernacle and he addressed this issue of the correlation between belief in Jesus as Savior and how that belief is manifested in our daily lives. Did you know that statistically the United States ranks 91st in countries as far as people who profess to be Christian. 79.5% of all American’s claim to be Christian believers. The number 1 country in Africa as far as percentages of its population that is Christian is Rwanda. 93% of that country is Christian.

Yet this is a country where not much more than 10 years ago over a span of 3 months between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people were slaughtered. It was domestic genocide with the Hutus and the Tutsis declaring war against each other. And the gruesome injuries for those who survived was not publicized but it is well documented, and most of that violence was against women. Hundreds of thousands of women bear those scars to this day. Some were members of our church in Moscow.

A Christian nation which kills itself, 20% of the population were wiped out, leaves one wondering what exactly does it mean to believe. We find Paul in Philippians telling us that we are saved by grace, but it is a concept that those killing each other definitely put into action. As long as I believe I can act how I want. But not realizing that if Jesus is your Savior and he has invaded your life then how you act is going to naturally mirror what you believe. In fact, Jesus never says we are saved by grace, rather for Christ our beliefs ought to manifest itself in action. Jesus rather prescribes a lifestyle which ought to naturally result how we are invaded by his presence.

Our Scripture in John today takes u tot the middle of the Lazarus resurrection story. I hope and pray that if anyone talks about the resurrection of Lazarus you will be able to say, Oh yeah, that’s in John. Some of you might even remember that it is in John chapter 11. We take it up after last week where we saw that Jesus says his illness will lead to God’s glory.

We arrive today and find that Lazarus is no longer ill, but rather he is dead and has been dead now for 4 days. That time span is significant because there was a belief in 1st century Judaism that through 3 days the soul was still lingering around but once the 4th day arrived, that was it.

Lazarus was dead. The mourners had already arrived from Jerusalem and were wailing up a storm in order to console the sisters. Jesus arrives on the outskirts of town which is where all the cemeteries were located. Having a cemetery in the center of town, next to a church, was unheard of back in those days. Martha goes out to see Jesus and tells him if you were here he would have lived. Jesus tells her that he gives life and that he is the resurrection and the life.

He then asks her: Do you believe this? Do you believe I am the resurrection and the life? She says she does but not in the terminology that we would necessarily accept. You are the Messiah, the Son of God. Only Thomas states his belief in Jesus in terminology that today we would accept as arriving at belief when he tells Jesus: My Lord and My God. As a result Jesus tells him that he believes because he saw, but blessed are those who believe and did not see.

What rises to our standard of belief? The divinity of Jesus has to be a prerequisite. I’ve also talked in the past of our exclusive claim of Christ alone that ought to be tempered by an inclusive claim to salvation.

In 2011 a survey was conducted on Presbyterians on a whole variety of theological issues. I thought it was interesting that more pastors believed in life after death than elders or members. More pastors than elders and members agreed that Christianity is the best way to find ultimate truth. More pastors than members believe that the church can help in shaping our belief systems than independently.

On the other hand more members and elders believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation. This statistic may be alarming to some, especially if we approach it from the perspective of Paul that the grace of our Savior requires belief in our Savior. Which is true. But if we approach it from the grace of our Savior which requires action that is a reflection of our belief then it should be less troubling.

Campolo told of two soldiers who were in the heat of battle and one of them crawled out of the foxhole to advance when he was shot so his friend went to bring him back. He lay on top of his friend but then he was riddled with bullets and died saving the life of his friend. After the war the friend went to the house of the parents of the one who saved his life.

When he arrived at the home he was dead drunk, he hadn’t held a job since he got back. He was a mess and the meeting did not go well. After he left, the mother who was absolutely distraught and even more so now after the visit cried aloud in disgust to her husband: “To think that our son would die for someone like that.”

God sent his son to die for us, for people even like us, and he expects our actions to emulate that sacrifice. It is almost too easy to say we believe and then look for the unbelievers to call them out. Jesus’ question to Martha about belief was not an intellectual question but one that was supposed to affect her as she went back to her sister and the mourners gathered there.

Naomi has become addicted to the musical Les Miserables, and it has been my favorite for years as I’ve seen it more than half a dozen times and in 4 different countries. The last line of this tremendous musical is “To love another person is to see the face of God.” When Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan and if we were to make it viable today. The question of how our belief is played out fundamentally answers the question of who is our neighbor.

It would be the pastor, the elder, and the deacon who would walk by that bleeding dying member of the church lying on the side of the road. Bu the Samaritan who is the outcast, the unclean, the one least welcomed into the church, by a church driven by grace for themselves and not able to line up their actions with their beliefs, the one for whom the church seems more like a group of people out to get him. Maybe the Samaritan would not be a Samaritan at all, but would be that gay teenager starting his senior year in high school who is told by his friends that God hates him and so do they. He reaches down and takes care of that person and so fulfills God’s desires more than any of us here might do, including me.

Do you believe this can be translated not do you think this is true, but rather do your actions naturally gravitate to what God would want us to do. A week from today we begin Vacation Bible School and it is a project for our entire community. There is no controversy in VBS. There are no two sides in VBS. We are all united and we can all rally around bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to the children who will come into our church. It is our opportunity to say we believe in Jesus by how we reach out to the community. The sign in our yard got people’s attention. It would be tremendous if 200 of us showed up this afternoon at 4 to get ready for this week coming up.

Some may think that it won’t make any difference in the big scheme of things. There are VBS’s all over town. Well, to that one 3rd grader who is wondering if anyone loves her, it could make all the difference in the world to her. I hope you believe this. Amen.