

A Little Faith in a Big God

James 2:14-26 Hebrews 11:1-3 Luke 17:5-6

Short series on faith, hope and love (1Cor.13). Last week: hope, this morning: faith.

Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Luke 17:5-6

5 The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' 6The Lord replied, 'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", and it would obey you.

This is the word of the Lord.

One relatively short sermon on the topic of faith seems kind of ambitious, maybe ridiculous, because it's such a vast topic. And it's a vast topic because, in the Bible, there are so many different expressions of faith—people who exercise faith to differing degrees, and in differing ways: some with great conviction, some with great doubts; some exercising faith in the midst of pain, some from mountaintop enthusiasm. In the Bible there are different opinions about what faith really is, or how to define it. We heard one strong opinion from James. Another from Hebrews. Then there is Jesus, who is both an *object* of faith, but

who also *exercised* faith as a human being—his faith in a God of love and compassion.

And Jesus himself never defined faith, what it is, exactly. The disciples ask to have their faith increased, and Jesus does not get out a whiteboard and sharpie and launch into a series of lectures that explain faith. He simply says it's good to have it—even a small amount of it—but never really defined what “it” is. He invited people to follow him, and he told stories.

It's also hard to succinctly define what faith is because every person's faith changes and evolves, as it should, over the years. I'm sure each of us could tell our faith story that would reveal a growing, changing, emerging, wondering (or sometimes wandering) faith.

Having said all of this, there is a core of what we might call a simple faith. What Jesus calls faith as small as a mustard seed.

That is, faith is trust, even if it's only a certain amount of trust. In the Christian tradition and practice, we *trust* that God is who God says God is, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We trust that God is love. We trust that God hears and answers prayer. We put our weight down on God's promises—or try to.

This all involves a certain amount of trust, even if we don't have 100% proof or aren't 100% sure of everything. That's why it's called faith, not certainty.

It *does* require a certain amount of confidence—“the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things unseen” as it says in our reading—although in that roll call of faith heroes from Hebrews 11 I’m not sure that all of those people had complete assurance and conviction; they each did take a step of faith, though, and trusted God and God’s promises and God’s goodness. And at some point *we* likewise take a step of faith, or maybe a leap of faith; we risk putting our weight down on something (Someone) and believe it to be true. And then act accordingly.

I was trying to come up with a clever and succinct definition of faith, as much for myself as for this message, and while working on that I remembered that I have this terrific little book by Presbyterian pastor and writer Frederick Buechner, titled “Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC.” It’s a winsome and at times funny and poignant little book where he takes words from the Bible or from the Christian vocabulary and playfully defines them, in alphabetical order. And I enjoyed his entry about faith, a description of faith:

“When God told Abraham, who was 100 at the time, that at the age of 90 his wife Sarah was finally going to have a baby, Abraham came close to knocking himself out—“fell on his face and laughed” as Genesis puts it (17:17). All the while, Sarah is hiding behind the door eavesdropping, and here it’s Sarah herself

who nearly splits a gut, although when God asks her about it she denies it. “No,” God says, “but you did laugh.” God doesn’t seem to hold their outburst against them, however. On the contrary, God tells them the baby’s going to be a boy and that God wants them to name him Isaac. Isaac in Hebrew means laughter.”

(Laughter does that, doesn’t it?)

Buechner continues: “Why did the two old crocks laugh? They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because laughing was better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it happened to come true they would really have something to laugh about, and in the meanwhile it helped keep them going.

Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than a possession. It is on-again, off-again rather than once-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you’re going but going anyway. A journey without maps.” (reminds me of Hebrews 11:8: “By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”

I like this so much. And I'd like to share briefly two things that both Buechner and the Scriptures emphasize:

First, faith is something we do. It involves actions. As Buechner says, it's more of a verb than a noun. So, we might call it *faithing*. There is the verb form of the word faith! Sounds weird, but I like it. Because faith isn't something you *have*, it's something you *do*. It's not a possession, it's an action. Faithing. It is a decision we make to trust. It's not a feeling that's dependent on circumstances.

This is what James is saying. Faith isn't merely intellectual assent or verbal agreement of certain statements. Faith, even a small amount, finds expression in action. Martin Luther didn't like the book of James; he called it "the epistle of straw" because he thought it focused too much on works and there wasn't enough theological substance. Luther quotes the apostle Paul: "by grace we are saved, through faith, not by works." But James tempers the apostle Paul (and Martin Luther) by quoting Jesus in several places in his epistle, and saying faith and action aren't mutually exclusive. There is no question of separating or prioritizing faith or action. It's like asking, which blade on a pair of scissors is more important?

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world... Therefore, let everyone see your good works." Faith isn't just warm fuzzies or great thoughts and ideas. It works itself out in acts of trust.

Second: if we have faith we are going to have doubts. Again, that's why it's faith, and not "certainty." Doubts, as someone called them, are the ants in the pants of faith. Doubts and questions keep faith honest. Doubts can actually help grow our faith; questions are good. Paul Tillich: "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. Sometimes I think it is my mission to bring faith to the faithless, and doubt to the faithful." What he meant: encourage good church folks to liven up their faith by asking more questions and being more curious.

For you and for me, along the way, on this journey with Jesus, we will experience doubts. There are different kinds of doubts:

Intellectual doubt: I have questions I need resolved about things I don't understand or that don't make sense to me.

Moral doubt: Does the gospel have good effect on people and the world? Is God good? Or another version of that: What good is God? Especially while there is pain and suffering or evil in the world.

Experiential doubt (similar to moral doubt): A personal difficulty or struggle causes me to question whether or not God is present or if God really cares. This is David in the Psalms—a lot!

Internal doubt: Doubt of myself; I can believe that God is love, but it's hard for me to believe that God loves me; I don't feel worthy of it, or qualified.

As we ponder our faith journeys perhaps we have experienced one of more of these kinds of doubt. Which is normal. And good! Speaking of normalizing doubt...

I love one short line in Matthew's post-resurrection account. Jesus appears to the disciples and here is what Matthew says: "When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted." I'm so grateful that statement is in there: "...but some doubted." This is one of those little details which years ago helped me, and still helps me, believe that Christianity is true. Because, I thought, who would make this up? If this were propaganda then it would say everyone believed, 100%. No doubters. And, all 4 gospel accounts in the Bible would say exactly the same thing; they would all agree; but they don't. We're told, quite honestly, that there were doubters among the disciples. I'm grateful for that detail of the account.

This normalizes doubt, in a way. It says, we will all experience doubts. Even pastors have doubts sometimes!

Something to notice: the doubters did not isolate themselves, away from the community of faith; nor were they told to go away (“no doubters allowed here!”)—they stayed *with* the community, and, they were welcomed *by* the community.

And when we are experiencing doubts, we need to continue to hang around the community of faith. It’s good for us to stay with the community, ask questions, listen, even pray, and have others pray for us. And it’s good for the community to welcome those who have questions and doubts—it helps keep everyone’s faith honest and sincere. In time, Jesus will reveal himself to us when we have doubts. Like he did to “doubting” Thomas—Jesus didn’t scold him for his doubts. Thomas stayed with the community and eventually Jesus helped resolve his doubts. Jesus is patient and understanding that way.

Earlier, I mentioned I was trying to come up with a succinct and snappy definition of faith. Here is one I came up with. And this is mine, and it’s just one way to look at faith. It would be interesting if each of us took some time to define faith for ourselves and we compared notes. For now, here is mine, probably

reflecting the time that we've been living through the last two or three years:

Trust, in the dark, what you know to be true in the light.

Trust, in the dark, what you knew to be true in the light. If we've experienced the light, experienced God's love and grace, known God's goodness, received help, that can help us in times of struggle, difficulty, wondering or wandering. We can remember, and act, in ways that reveal our faith and trust.

Everyone goes through dark, difficulty, schlog. After Mother Teresa died and her journals and letters were published, we found out that she experienced deep anguish at God's seeming absence at times during her life. For example, in a letter she wrote to a friend, she says: "Jesus has a very special love for you; but as for me, the darkness and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear--the tongue moves [in attempted prayer] but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me." Mother Teresa! Asking for prayer! A woman who seemed as close to God as anyone, and who was so filled with joy and love.

She went through experiential doubt, but she continued to do her good work, in faith. She trusted, in the dark, what she knew to be true in the light.

One last thought, to state something obvious: Our faith/trust is in *God*. Duh. But we need to be reminded of the obvious sometimes. Our faith/trust is in *God*. Our faith isn't in our faith (how much faith we have). Our faith is not in a set

of doctrines. Our faith isn't in our goodness. Our faith is in God's faithfulness, as we sang earlier. We trust in God's trustworthiness. And, according to Jesus, it doesn't take much: faith as small as a mustard seed. In another place, "a little faith will move mountains." Because a little faith in a big God, can be powerful. It's God who is powerful; not our faith.

What is "a little" faith like? Maybe it's like "a little" hot sauce. The real deal—doesn't take much, but it's powerful. It's not about quantity, but the quality/effect/power of the sauce. (This is not a great illustration because I don't particularly like this stuff; it burns my mouth; but hopefully it makes the point).

A little faith, a little act of trust, can produce a large results from God. Jesus says it can move a mulberry bush, or a little faith can move mountains. I'm not sure that's what Jesus wants us to ask for in prayer—I'm sure the Creator is happy with where the Olympics and Cascades are right now. But Jesus is using an over-the-top illustration to make a point. A little faith can have a large impact, by God's power and not our efforts. We tap into the real deal. We have a little faith in a big God.