

## *Faith*

<sup>NRS</sup> **1 Chronicles 10:13** So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD; moreover, he had consulted a medium, seeking guidance,<sup>14</sup> and did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 12:27-28** Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.<sup>28</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you-- you of little faith!

<sup>NRS</sup> **Hebrews 11:7** By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.<sup>10</sup> For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

## *Faith<sup>1</sup>*

Faith. A simple word. We use it all the time. Or perhaps we misuse it all the time. That's an exaggeration, but it's probably fair to say that we often use it in such a narrow way that we end up misusing the word *faith*. At lot of the time, we use the word *faith* to refer to major religions. The faiths of the western world are Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The eastern faiths include Hinduism and Buddhism. Or we might use the word to refer to a smaller group. If someone asks, "What faith are you a member of," one might reply Presbyterian or Baptist or Methodist. And the person asking the question is likely to respond with something like, "Baptist! Oh, I know. You believe in complete immersion baptism." Or, "Presbyterian. Y'all believe in predestination." We tend to sort out various faiths by their set of beliefs. In fact, we often use the words faith and belief almost interchangeably.

*Faith* seems to mean holding a certain set of beliefs, certain dogmas or doctrines – things such as believing there is a God, that Jesus is the Son of God, believing in the Bible as God's word, and so on. Depending on which part of Christianity we're talking about, having faith might require believing in adult baptism, the rapture, the virgin birth, the Trinity, or snake handling. Some of those beliefs are almost universal among Christians, some are held by very few. This primary concern about what we believe has tended to make Christianity a religion of the head, focused on what we think, what claims and propositions we hold to be true and factual.

There is no doubt that *faith* is at the very core, at the very heart, of Christianity. In Hebrews chapter 11, the author lists a bunch of Old Testament heroes and says, "by faith Abel, by faith Enoch, by faith Noah, and on and on listing ancestors who received approval by faith. Probably the best-known Bible verse is John 3:16, which says, in part, that whoever believes in Jesus will have everlasting life. Faith and/or believing are so central in scripture that the two words are found in all of the New Testament books -except Second and Third John, which are each less than a page long.

Martin Luther, wracked by guilt over his shortcomings, was astonished to read in Romans (3:28 and others) that we are justified by faith, not by works. That realization was at the core of the Reformation and "justification by faith" was – and is – an emphasis by the Reformation and those of us who are descended from the Reformed movement. But what is this faith that justifies us?

*Faith* has four major meanings, but during the Reformation, one meaning began to dominate. Faith can mean assent, giving our mental agreement to a statement. This is faith as a matter of believing, a matter of the mind. The Reformation produced several denominations and they all defined themselves by what they believed. They distinguished themselves from each other, and from the Roman Catholic

Church, based on what they believed. The emphasis was on what they believed differently, rather than on what they held in common. Beliefs about baptism separated Calvinists from Anabaptists. Beliefs about communion separated Lutherans from Presbyterians. All of them were separated from the Roman Catholic Church over beliefs about the power of the church and the power of the priests. So, Christian faith became a matter of believing the right things - and not holding wrong beliefs. Even the word *Orthodox* changed meaning – from referring to “correct worship” to meaning “right beliefs.”

The next development was what is often called the Enlightenment. This was the birth of modern science and scientific thinking. We began to understand our world through the tools of Newton’s Laws of Physics. Benjamin Franklin experimented with electricity. Modern medicine began to develop because of scientific reasoning and the scientific method of learning. In the process, the word “truth” came to be identified with factuality, that is, truth is that which can be scientifically proved. And we’ve come to use the word belief for opinion, especially if it is something contrary to evidence and reason. My grandmother believed that one of the ingredients in homemade jelly was good for arthritis. We use the word belief when we aren’t sure. We say, “I don’t know for sure, but I believe such and such.” Faith is what you have when you move past facts and certainty. And faith is what you need when belief and knowledge are in conflict.

Let me give an example of how we have come to use the words faith and belief. There are a few people who are sure that the earth is flat. They can point to Isaiah 11:12 and show where God will gather the people of Judah from the “four corners of the earth.” They would reason this way. “True means factual. I believe the Bible is true. The Bible says the earth has four corners. Therefore the earth is flat. Despite whatever trick photography or mathematical gyrations you might lay in front of me, I must have faith!” When apparent facts disagree, one has to have faith, one has to believe. And in this structure of understanding, doubt is lack of faith and disbelief is the absence of faith. In this understanding, God is most concerned about what we believe. Correct belief will save us; incorrect belief will get us in trouble. The result is that we often feel like faith depends on believing specific things. If you aren’t absolutely positive that you believe in the virgin birth, or creation as described in Genesis chapter one, or the subjection of women, then you don’t have any faith.

When we only understand faith as agreeing with certain statements, we miss so much of the meaning of the word. Faith is more than intellectual agreement that something is correct belief. Faith is trust. The old Latin term is *fiducia* and the modern English word from that root is fiduciary, which doesn’t mean a whole lot to most of us unless we’re accountants or work in the financial field. So the best way of expressing this aspect of faith is to think of it as radical trust. If you ever tried to teach a child to swim, the hardest part was probably getting the child to relax. If you relax, you float. If you tense up and fight the water, you sink and get water up your nose. Faith is, so to speak, trusting in the buoyancy of God, the one in whom “we live and move and have our being,” as Paul put it (Acts 17:28) This faith as trust is what the Psalmist was referring to in the phrase “my rock and my redeemer.”

The opposite of trust isn’t doubt, but mistrust, anxiety, and worry. In the Sermon on the Mount, in the space of ten verses as Jesus talks about how God cares for the birds and the lilies, four times Jesus says, “Do not worry. Don’t be anxious,” and adds, “you of little faith.” Little faith is shown by being anxious. Huge faith is exhibited by trust. If we could cast off our anxieties, if we could “Fear not,” think how free we would be, how well we would be able to love. Think how that would transform our life!

Another meaning of faith is fidelity, fidelity as loyalty, allegiance, commitment at our deepest level, commitment of our heart. The opposite of faith as fidelity is infidelity – and the scriptures have a lot to say about this kind of faith. In today’s reading, we heard how Saul was unfaithful to God. In the second verse of the book of Hosea we are told that the nation has committed great whoredom by forsaking God. In the sixteenth chapter of Ezekiel, the nation of Israel is repeatedly described as a prostitute for her unfaithfulness to God. The first of the Ten Commandments is “You shall have no other gods before me.”(Deut. 5:7) Or, as Jesus put it, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”(Matt. 22:37) When Jesus spoke of an evil and adulterous generation (Matt. 12:39), he was talking about their lack of faith, their unfaithfulness to God. The biblical

term for infidelity to God is idolatry, giving our ultimate loyalty and allegiance to something other than God.

Having faith, being faithful to God bears some resemblance to marital faithfulness. It calls for being attentive to the relationship with God with worship, prayer, and living a life of compassion and justice.

Faith is also vision, a way of seeing everything, a way of seeing what is - our outlook on life. We can see life as hostile and threatening. In this way of seeing things, God is going to get us if we don't offer the right sacrifices, behave the right way, or believe the right things. God will judge and punish us if we don't get it right. A second faith vision is indifference. In this vision, the universe operates by laws of physics and is indifferent to human beings. God has put it all in motion and has stepped aside to watch. The third way we can see things is to view life as life-giving and nourishing. We see creation as bountiful and gracious. We remember that God sends the rain on the just and the unjust alike. God is generous. And we recall the proverb that where there is no vision, the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18)

So faith isn't just about the head, a matter of what we believe, but it's also about matters of the heart, about trust, about fidelity, and about vision. Not that believing isn't important. But we need to understand how the word believe has changed meaning over the centuries. We recite the Apostles' Creed. In the original language, the first word is *credo* and we translate that as "I believe." But the Latin roots are richer than that. *Credo* means "I give my heart to, I commit my loyalty to, I give my allegiance to." We are saying in a profound way, "I give my heart to God."

Just as the word *orthodox* has changed in meaning, so has the word *believe*. Before the seventeenth century, the word believe could only be applied to a person, not to propositions or statements. To believe meant to "be-love," to hold dear, to give one's loyalty to, to give faithfulness, loyalty, trust, commitment, and allegiance to a person. Believing in God meant be-loving God. Faith was about believing God. Faith is our love for God. Faith is the way of the heart.

So, do you have faith? Do you love God? With all your heart, mind, and soul? Do you trust God? Do you give your allegiance to God? Is your vision of life one filled with God? Do you have faith? Amen.

<sup>NRS</sup> **John 3:16** "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Isaiah 11:12** He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Romans 3:28** For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Ephesians 2:8** For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Acts 17:26** From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup> so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

<sup>NRS</sup> **Psalms 19:14** Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Matthew 6:25** "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup> But

strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.<sup>34</sup> "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

<sup>NRS</sup> **2 Chronicles 29:6** For our ancestors have been unfaithful and have done what was evil in the sight of the LORD our God; they have forsaken him, and have turned away their faces from the dwelling of the LORD, and turned their backs.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Hosea 1:2** When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD."

<sup>NRS</sup> **Exodus 20:3** you shall have no other gods before me.

**Ezekiel 16** - Israel as the whore

<sup>NRS</sup> **Matthew 22:37-40** He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment.<sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 8:38** Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

<sup>KJV</sup> **Proverbs 29:18** Where *there is* no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy *is* he.

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<sup>1</sup> See Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, (New York, Harper Collins, 2003) p 25-42