

“Faith – Not Fear”

June 14, 2015

Marked for Life in Christ series

Each year, the Pew Research Center provides an update on America’s religious landscape. And this year’s report made big news. The number of those who claim Christian faith is down sharply, and those who identify as “unaffiliated” is up. Maybe that’s cause for concern, or maybe it’s just a more honest response from folks. So what are we to do? How do we seek a vital faith for ourselves in order that we fulfill our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?

I kept thinking of John Wesley, who sought to bring revival within the Anglican Church that he loved. He encouraged others to meet together, to grow deeper in love with God, and to let their faith show in everyday life as they cared for others. Wesley’s own faith and leadership is an inspiration, and his desire to see himself and others be Christian – not in name only, but also in heart and life – is a challenge to us.

Wesley was clear that the marks of the Christian life were laid out in Scripture - faith, hope, and love. So that’s where we’ll go in these next three weeks. I hope we’re challenged to deeply consider what it means for each of us to be marked for life in Christ with faith, hope, and love.

First, FAITH. I don’t believe that doubt is the opposite of faith. I think it’s fear. Frederick Buechner writes: “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-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you’re going, but going anyway. A journey without maps. Paul Tillich said that doubt isn’t the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.” He also says that doubts are the ants in the pants of faith; they keep it moving and alive.

We’ll sing “Hymn of Promise” today, and Natalie Sleeth’s words are powerful: “In our doubt, there is believing.” I cling to those – not because I’m full of doubt, but because there’s freedom in knowing that doubts are a part of who we are before God. Scripture is full of questions from people seeking God. “God, where are you?” “God, where should I go?”

It’s difficult to define faith. Yes, faith is trust, but that definition isn’t enough. We place our trust in a lot of people. Health care professionals who care for us, pilots and drivers who transport us, elected officials who serve for the good of our community and nation, childcare providers, teachers, school staff, coaches who nurture our children, caregivers who help us or our family members, friends in whom we confide, and the list goes on. Trust is key to relationships, and when it is broken, that connection suffers.

The Book of Hebrews is a way to rally God's people. First, we place our faith in God who has created the universe. This faith is a deeper, fuller trust. Faith is a gift of God, but it requires our acceptance and response. Then, there's this list of heroes and heroines of faith – a great roll call of witnesses including Abraham, who was willing to go when God called and willing to wait on God and Sarah, who was willing to dare to try even when it seemed impossible. And list goes on...

And it's not just about celebrating and remembering them; it's also about being challenged to consider what it means for us to be among them. To live by faith and not by sight. To go with God even when the outcome isn't sure or certain. To take the risk of stepping out with God.

There's encouragement for us: "others have done this, and you can, too!" For those who received this letter, living by faith was something they had already done. Those who received this were Jews who had become Christians. Certainly they had experienced hardship and persecution because of their faith. It hadn't been easy for them, and they could've lived in fear. But they had already shown courage, and these words remind them of who they are, the faithfulness of their ancestors, and a call to be formed by their faith in Jesus Christ.

Maybe you remember Peanuts and Lucy's famous psychiatric help booth. In one scene, Linus comes to her full of fear and anxiety, and the "only thing that keeps me going is this blanket!" he says.

Lucy goes through a litany of specific phobias and finally says, "Do you think you might have pantophobia?"

"What's that?" Linus says.

"The fear of everything." Lucy says.

Linus says, "That's it!"

Perhaps Linus is more descriptive of some of us than we'd like to admit. What do you fear? It's easy to make a list. I have one. Some of them rational; some not so much. But our fears can be a block to the faith that God offers us in Jesus Christ. Sometimes faith is compromised by fear. When we don't feel in control, when there's opposition, we can allow fear to get the better of us.

Fear shows itself as apathy. We forget that faith requires action. We need to be pushed to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. I don't know anyone who has been able to be a faithful disciple on their own. Faith pushes us to take risks – to try new ministries, to reach out.

Fear can also show as discouragement. We need each other to be faithful. But feelings of inadequacy can creep in. Perhaps we struggle to feel worthy. When we blow it, we don't think anyone cares, and we struggle to believe that God even cares.

But that's the power of the Body of Christ. God does care deeply about each of us. And the way we nurture faith is to remember that God is faithful – faithful to bring hope out of despair, healing out of brokenness, and even life out of death.

It's important to clarify what faith isn't. It's not wishful thinking. It's not hoping for something that we don't have. It's not doubt. Faith is trusting in God's character – that God is faithful to God's promises. **We sang it this morning: "Great is thy faithfulness...there is no shadow of turning with thee...thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not..."** Faith is an assurance – a conviction – that we know who God is because God is revealed in Jesus. We trust in God's promise of new life because Jesus rose from the dead.

Faith is literally what we live by – trusting that God is with us every step. Faith is over the long haul. Yes, there are moments when we make quick decisions by faith, but faith is cultivated and nurtured as we journey with God. Wesley says that faith isn't just understanding who God is, but letting God transform us over time. Faith is what drives us to know that we are sinners, but faith also drives us to know that God offers us relationship and freedom from fear.

Wesley also says that faith offers us power over sin – both what we say and do and what we struggle with inside. And another product of faith is peace because of God's love and grace. "It is a peace which all the powers of earth and hell are unable to take...Waves and storms beat upon it, but they shake it not; for it is founded upon a rock. It keepeth the hearts and minds of the children of God, at all times and in all places. Whether they are in ease or in pain, in sickness or health, in abundance or want, they are happy in God. In every state they have learned to be content..."

Faith is clearest to me in the spiritual lives of those who have been on the journey with God for a long time. I think of those who have that sense that for as tightly as we hold on for control, God is faithful and is working for good. I think of Lois, a woman whose husband died in a tragic accident when they were young. She told me that even when she found out and was faced with raising her three young sons alone, she had a deep assurance of God's presence with her.

I think of those who have experienced tragic loss and deep grief and who are able to speak of God's grace and power. This week I saw Dave, Lisa, and Lucas Wypa present a scholarship in memory of Nik to a girl who has been a wonderful friend to Ana as she's been a new kid this year. Their witness of faith that God can do incredible things in tragedy is amazing.

I think of those who radiate joy, not happiness, but joy in the Lord. Virginia Deephouse turned 99 years old last week, and she radiates joy in the Lord. And this isn't just for the more mature among us. You and I can live in that joy and show it every day.

As we grow in our relationship with God, we recognize God's faithfulness and respond to it.

For as much as the definition of faith offers us, it's clear from the roll call of witnesses that faith requires acting on our trust in God within the community of faith. Faith requires obedience to God. Many times, faith requires taking risks and doing what we would never do alone. Even though we would rather seek comfort, faith calls us to risk with God.

And let's be honest: I'd love if faith meant that I had all of the answers, had a sense of security that never wavered, was a quick fix, eliminated tough times and suffering, or could make sense out of what happens. But it doesn't. More often, it's that mustard-seed size bit of trust that we're willing to give – and even those conversations we're willing to have with God – that show deep faith. Perseverance, patience, sacrifice, and love are a big part of it. "Faith in Jesus doesn't mean that we have all the answers, but that we know and completely trust the One who does."

And we can't underestimate how our own witness of faith encourages others. Someone has said, "faith is more often caught than taught." We know it when we see it. And that's why connection in the body of Christ is so important. Part of what I hear and struggle with in this information from the Pew Center is that there are less people connected to a church or faith community. I assume you're here because it's important to you to be here. I hope it's not an exercise in just being here.

God is at work in us when we gather, and the work and attention we pay to welcoming people with hospitality and focusing on reaching new people matters. We want new folks to encounter the living God in a powerful way – and make a connection. We want people to know that they don't have to have it figured out when they walk through these doors because we don't!

We wouldn't be here without the faith of someone else. Building relationship with God and each other is key. Faith is formed by worshipping together, talking to each other, reaching out beyond these walls, not waiting for people to come here before we welcome all and serve one another, but taking it out to the streets!

So the question is: will we live by faith – not fear? Will we trust God – not just when we're pushed to the edge, but even in the everyday stuff? Will we follow when we don't know the details? Will we live with our doubts – even embrace them – and let God work in us? May God continue to give us faith – not fear – as we seek to follow faithfully.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.