

“Building a Strong Family of God: Faith”

September 26, 2021

How do you describe your family? You might be hesitant to describe your family honestly. Each of us is a part of a family. Sometimes it's biological; sometimes adoptive; sometimes family is made up of close friends. If you're a “Fast and Furious” fan, you know the importance of family for those who aren't related, but who take care of each other.

Even so, “family” can be a loaded word. You may have a great relationship with family, or you may struggle to remain close. Your family may be different than you ever envisioned. You may have some written (and unwritten) family rules - some may be memories; some may be a part of how you live together now. No matter who we are, where we come from, and what our experience of family has been or is now, God created us for connection and community.

In Scripture, the notion of the “family of God” is clear. We're called “children of God” - all of us - and connected to each other because God is our Creator. Jesus is God Incarnate - in the flesh - born into a family. Jesus knows our full humanity. The Holy Spirit reminds us that God is relational - one God in three persons - the mystery and blessing of the Trinity - God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

As we consider how we might build a stronger family of God - in our own homes and family relationships and in the church community - you'll find a card in your bulletin and available if you're joining us online. The word “family” will guide us in this series, and the first theme is the foundation - FAITH.

Have you ever gone on a trip without a map? I'll be honest...I can't imagine life without a map phone app. Even though there are times it's not quite right, I use it a lot to get where I need to go.

It's been said that faith is a journey without maps, and there's some truth to that, but as we're starting this new series about building a strong family of God and what that requires, faith really becomes the map. It's true enough that faith doesn't always mean that we'll see the whole picture - and maybe we just have to go one step at a time - but faith is the foundation of our spiritual lives. We place our faith in the resurrection of Jesus - the hope and new life that God offers in him.

This is a stewardship series over six weeks. We're stewards of all of God's gift, including faith. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson paraphrase Hebrews 11:1 this way **(SLIDE)** *The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see.* How are we celebrating our faith? Sharing it? Nurturing it?

Faith is a gift that develops in us. Someone has said, “faith is more often caught than taught.” Faith is modeled and seen. James Fowler is known for his theory of faith development. And it’s not surprising that Fowler addresses the issue of trust at the first stage. An infant needs warmth, safety, and security to trust others - and to begin to build trust in God. Right away, we understand that faith is developed in community.

The stages continue through childhood as children develop a sense of right and wrong (justice), into teenage years as we develop a religious identity, into years that may include struggle as we confront the complexities of faith and come to a place of accepting them - or at least knowing that faith isn’t so simple. For some, developing continues to a place where love and justice are the greatest concern and goal. Faith is complex.

Even as we talk about how faith develops, we also know that Jesus talked about the great power of even “small” faith. We saw that mustard seed and bush earlier.

SLIDE: Image of mustard seed and bush

I had a friend who gave me a small container of mustard seeds in college - a reminder of the faith that we shared - and its power in our lives. And it certainly made me think of Jesus’ words in the Gospels:

SLIDE: “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.” (Mark 4: 30-32)

SLIDE: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you. (Luke 17: 6)

It’s a powerful truth - that God can do something great with even a small amount of faith. We need a faith foundation. We need it to celebrate - and give glory to God and remember that God is good because that witness matters. From the beginning, God tells the Israelites to love God with everything - heart, soul, and mind - and to “impress the commandments on your children” - talk about them at home or away from home, write them down, share them, teach them.

It’s important to clarify what faith isn’t. Faith is 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 good and faithful to God’s promises. Faith is a gift to be claimed and cherished. And faith is to be shared with those closest to us and with our community.

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.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, said 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 who need God's grace, but faith also drives us to know that God offers us relationship and freedom from fear of sin and death.

Wesley also said 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. These are Wesley's words: "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..."

We need faith to get through tough times - even though they can be so tough. Faith doesn't make it easier, but it makes it different. I hear it when people are going through grief: *I don't know what people do if they don't have something to lean on (faith).*

I experienced it myself when my dad died early last year. It wasn't my first close family loss, but probably the most difficult so far in my 44 years. Faith in God buoyed me up and reminded me that my dad rests in God's perfect peace even as I felt the pain of his physical absence.

And I recognized how much the faith of a family and community matters, too - cards, texts, calls, meals, and acts of care that affirmed for me that faith isn't just an emotional exercise, but a true and real gift that God gives us that transforms the world. It wasn't just my faith that carried me through, but the faith of others who shared my faith and prayed me through.

I know I'm not alone. You have stories of faith, too. And I wonder if the writer of Hebrews invites us to see ourselves as a part of this list of people who live by faith - the likes of Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and Rahab (yes, that Rahab) who lived "by faith" and allowed faith in God to guide and help them. We may think of these faith ancestors as closer to God than we could ever be, but the call is that we're growing deeper in our faith every day.

The write of this letter to the Hebrews is trying 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. And then there's this great roll call of the faithful who showed great faith in God when life was uncertain,

when things seemed impossible, when they were asked to take a risk, and so much more.

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 so can you - by faith!"

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.

This is a call for us, too. We are stewards of all of God's gifts to us - and that includes faith - faith that saves us and challenges us to live each day and seek God's will for our lives and for the world God so loves.

What would be written about you and me? What would we be commended for? How have we showed faith in our lives so much so that someone would say, "By faith, she reflected hope in Christ in a time of illness. By faith, he sought forgiveness when he hurt someone he loved. By faith, she served out of her giftedness and encouraged others to use their gifts. By faith, she paid attention to the Holy Spirit's nudging and prayed fervently for others - and told them she prayed for them. By faith, he shared his love of Jesus with others through music. By faith, she cared for a loved one with God's grace. By faith, he sought justice for those who needed an advocate." All of those examples apply to someone or more than one person in this congregation.

In a culture that often prizes self-reliance at all costs rather than reaching out to others for support and courage, this word on faith is a call to see how much we need each other and what a gift and challenge faith is. We can't underestimate how our witness encourages others. Yes, we know these names of the faithful, but we're also called to be a part of this faithful group.

Building a strong family of God requires faith as the core foundation. It matters in our homes and it matters as we love and serve as the Body of Christ in the world. 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. That's not what faith is. That's not what faith does. Faith means trusting that God is good, God is faithful, and God is with us.

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 and each other – 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."

So, if you wrote your own example of living "by faith," what would it say? What about someone who helped you to live by faith - the one who taught you, loved you, shared their faith? My prayer is that we remember those people and realized that we're called to be that for someone else.

May we live by faith - and be a witness to the world - of God's grace, God's love, God's power, and God's promises.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.