

Exploring Faith

So here we are today, back on the road with Jesus.

The high holy seasons are finished.

The smells and bells have been put away.

The great mysteries of our faith, from our Lord's birth to the meditations on the mystery of the Holy Trinity are no longer front and center.

Instead, we are back on the road with Jesus.

And how appropriate that the overwhelming theme of today's readings is about faith.

I think we often underestimate the significance of faith in our life.

We tend to forget that before Christ, all of human religion, from the most basic animist to the most sophisticated Hindu, all are based on **this** foundation:

What can and must **humans do** to appease and satisfy God, or the gods?

Before Christ, all religious belief was centered on humanity needing to pacify, satisfy, and appease God, and the gods.

Thus the sacrifices of humans and animals.

Thus the rules to follow meticulously, carefully.

And that's why Christianity is not a religion.

Because religion is about humanity seeking God.

Whereas Christianity is about God seeking humanity.

And so it is that faith in Christ turns everything on its head.

The centrality of faith is hinted at way back in the older testament with the story of Abraham.

A man who lived in a culture in which family ties stretching back generations are more precious than gold.

Yet despite those deep ties to his ancestral lands and kin, Abraham responds to the call from this unknown God to leave everything behind.

To head off to an unknown, far country.

Abraham becomes the first seed in what shall blossom into a most magnificent garden.

Our gospel lesson picks up this theme of the power and centrality of faith.

The gospel begins with prostitutes and tax collectors.

Outsiders in their own community who have faith that somehow, they will be welcomed by Jesus.

They have an inkling that those who were once outsiders are now becoming insiders, while the former insiders risk becoming self-created outsiders.

All of this plays itself out in the ridicule and consternation of the Pharisees, who simply cannot believe that a religious leader would socialize with folks such as these.

That's because these religious leaders are so deeply rooted in religion.

They are consumed by the notion that they must act in a certain way in order for God to care for them.

They must earn their salvation.

They must deserve their salvation.

Shockingly, disturbingly, appallingly, Jesus turns all of that on its head by bringing God's love to the whole world and to all people.

And the only response necessary from any of us is the response of faith.

And here's the thing, faith isn't some thing that **we** develop.

It's not something that's created or controlled or manufactured by us.

Rather, faith is a free gift from God — given to us.

And if we are open to receiving it, it will of its own power and accord grow and blossom.

So this morning, tax collectors and prostitutes are given this gift, and they welcome it.

Its a gift offered as well to the religious leaders, but they are too consumed with religion to receive it.

Our gospel this morning then takes us to encounter the woman whose life, for 12 long years, is bleeding out of her.

She is given this gift of faith, and her life is restored.

Even the synagogue leader, willing to risk humiliation from his neighbors and peers because of his love for his daughter, is given the gift of faith, and his openness to receive it bears fruit — in the new breath inhaled by his little girl.

Here's the thing; this shift in our relationship with God has cosmic implications.

Saint Paul, who never knew Jesus in the flesh, does know Jesus stunningly well in the spirit.

And in his masterpiece of theological reflection, his letter to the Romans, Paul struggles with the cosmic shift from what once was humanity's relationship with God — to what it is now.

And that shift is a shift from obeying the law to having faith in Christ.

Which changes everything.

But be careful as we think about the Law.

The point here isn't that the Jewish people follow kosher or rituals of cleanliness.

The larger point is this:

We humans are consumed with the notion that we gotta be good to earn our way to good things.

We are consumed with thoughts of being better than each other, and therefore in competition with each other, and therefore always at odds with each other.

God, in Jesus, is having none of that.

Faith breaks down all barriers.

Since faith is a gift, we can't claim it as our own.

We can't hoard it.

We can't claim credit for it.

We can't look down on others — because we are humbled by the free gift that's been given to us.

A life of faith changes us from people consumed with competition to people consumed with compassion.

It changes us from people mercilessly seeking advancement to people mercifully extending understanding.

It moves us from fear to friendship.

From hate to humor.

From lustful desires to lasting love.

We open ourselves to this faith by being open to the Way of Christ.

When we let go of trying to control people, places, and things.

When we surrender our life, rather than hold onto it.

When we turn the other cheek, give the jacket as well as the shirt, and walk the extra mile, we open ourselves to receive this marvelous gift that grows of its own accord.

It's like the old story of two guys standing outside the twin trade towers before they were knocked down.

Looking up, they see somebody's put a long piece of wood between the two buildings.

One fellow says to the other:

"Do you know the difference between belief and faith?"

The other fellow responds, "No, what's the difference?"

The first says "do you **believe** that that guy can walk a wheel-barrel from one building to the other across that narrow board?"

The second guy says:

"Sure, I believe he can do that."

The first guy then says, "but do you have **faith** he can do it?"

And the second fellow says:

“Whaddya mean?”

Replies the first fellow:

“Go sit in the wheelbarrow while he wheels it from one building to the other!”

Opening ourselves to **faith** is putting our fannies in the wheelbarrow named Jesus.

It means actually living this wonderful life that we are invited into.

This life of release, of surrender, of letting things be.

And when we enter into that flow, the unspeakable freedom that faith provides comes swimming in, and engulfs all that we are.

And very often, in order to get to this place where we are willing to sit in the wheel-barrel, it is pain or loss that gets us there.

We need to be cracked open in order to have the openness necessary for faith to be planted, and to blossom.

And that cracking open very often is the consequence of pain.

We see it in the gospel as the tax collectors and prostitutes, so long accustomed to being thrown out of respectable society, use that brokenness to find their way to Jesus.

We see it with the woman whose life has been bleeding out of her for 12 years.

Pain, loss and ritual uncleanness, separating her from others, opens her to seek out Jesus.

And just so, the synagogue leader, who endures the ridicule of family and friends, but the pain of the loss of his daughter moves him to seek out Jesus.

We so often run from pain.

We so often pray that our lives will be spared from it.

And yet, pain seems to be the crowbar necessary to crack open our hearts to faith.

So when pain does come, we can welcome it, endure it, and trust that it's preparing us for a deeper life of faith in Christ.

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