

Homily – A Steadfast Faith

Rob Keim

March 5, 2023 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

I've shared this story before, but I think it is worth sharing again. "The following letter was found in a baking-powder can wired to the handle of an old pump that offered the only hope of drinking water on a very long and seldom-used trail across one of Nevada's deserts. The letter says, "This pump is all right as of June 1932. I put a new leather washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There's enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one-fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You'll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller. (signed) Desert Pete. P.S. Don't go drinking the water first. Prime the pump with it and you'll git all you can hold. So what would you do in this situation? Would you trust the instructions in the letter? Would you have faith in Desert Pete, a person you have never met?"

Faith is one of those things that is part of our everyday living. Faith is trusting in things that can't be proved. Kierkegaard writes about the leap of faith, and Augustine wrote that "faith is to believe what we do not see, and the reward of faith is to see what we believe."

And, here is a little story to illustrate the opposite of faith. "The African impala can jump to a height of over 10 feet and cover a distance of greater than 30 feet. Yet these magnificent creatures can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a 3-foot wall. The animals will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall. Faith is the ability to trust what we cannot see, and with faith we are freed from the flimsy enclosures of life." We are freed from the fears that we allow to entrap us.

In today's Old Testament reading, Abram did not allow himself to be entrapped. Instead when the Lord said "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you," when God said this, Abram went. He leapt into the unknown. He accepted that good things would happen if he followed the will of God.

And today's New Testament reading is a theological argument that the Apostle Paul makes to the early followers of Jesus in Rome. Two thousand years ago, observant Jews focused on the Law, the Ten Commandments and the six hundred other laws of God that were found in the Torah. However, Paul points back to the patriarch, Abraham. Abraham was in close relationship with God, a relationship that predates

the giving of the Law to Moses. In this way Paul is showing that the faith Abraham showed in God is the actual foundation of all relationship with God. Faith or trust in God and God's love is important.

And, in the Gospel this week, Nicodemus is the consummate religious insider — a conscientious Pharisee, a "member of the ruling Jewish council," and "a teacher of Israel." As I said earlier, ancient Jews were very fastidious about following the Laws of God that had been given to Moses. We should not be dismissive of this type of well-intended and earnest religiosity. But Jesus tells Nicodemus that if he wants to "enter the kingdom of God," he must at some level repudiate this type of religiosity. Instead, he must be twice-born, once by his earthly mother through water, and then again by his heavenly Father through the Spirit. Only the free gift of God's love, and no religious effort, can do this. This turning of the tables about what counts and doesn't count would have rocked Nicodemus' world. It would have shaken him to the core, but there seems to be evidence that Nicodemus had faith and trust in what Jesus was telling him. It looks like Nicodemus learned his lesson. He's mentioned only two other times in the gospels. In John 7, he advises his colleagues that they should not judge Jesus without hearing him. And in John 19, he and Joseph of Arimathea tend to Jesus's dead body. Nicodemus looks like he had enough faith in Jesus to become an honored follower of Jesus.

Now, "faith" is one of those churchy words that gets thrown around a lot by Christians, and there are certainly times that it gets misused. Sometimes Christians use faith as sort of a test to see if someone believes that exact same things that they do. However, faith is not affirmation of a creed, doctrine or orthodoxy. By extension faith is not an intellectual argument.

Instead Jesus, the Apostle Paul and the patriarch Abraham all show that faith is "a foundational confidence or trust that God cares about what is happening right now." Faith is not about what we believe about the virgin birth or about biblical inerrancy, or about the presence of Jesus in the bread and wine. Instead faith is the confidence that we are always surrounded, in the here and now, by the loving embrace of God. And, that love of God "is like a living organism, an active force-field upon which we can rely, from which we can draw, and we can allow to pass through us." We can have faith in God's love and mirror it back out into the world.

With that definition of faith on the table, let's look at faith in three different contexts – faith during awful times, faith in death, and faith during the normal ups and downs of life. First, there is faith during awful times, during very serious injury or illness. What does faith mean after a bad car accident or diagnosis of cancer? What does faith look like today in Ukraine or in Turkey. Whether it is a hope that God will fix things, a conviction that all is for the best, or a belief that God will be present through

the tough times, faith can sustain a person. However, I just listed three very different concepts of faith. The first is a hope, sometimes against all evidence, that God will make the bad things go away. This type of faith can be very sustaining when things finally go the right way, but this type of faith can also turn people away from God when things go the wrong way.

And sometimes faith is a conviction that all awful things work towards ultimate good. My own life experience shows that sometimes this is the case, but at least for me at other times the jury is still out. If I had enough faith would I be convinced that all awful things work towards good?

And sometimes faith is a belief that God is always present. This is the definition that I shared earlier, and it is the one that I cling to. God is always holding us and embracing us. The Holy Spirit of God sustains us and walks with us through the worst times.

And like any good thing, sometimes we twist this faith-thing in weird ways. Let me share what I mean by that. Sometimes we are afraid that we don't have enough faith and that tough or horrid times are evidence of a lack of faith. I am sorry to say that throughout history, and even still today, we have a lot of people that think that illness or misfortune is evidence of God's displeasure. If you are sick, then you must have done something wrong or it is punishment from God. To me, this is a blame the victim mentality and this needs to be overcome. Over and over Jesus is shown helping those in need and walking with those who suffer. We are called to do the same. We are called to walk towards and not away from those that are in the midst of tough or even horrid times. We trust that God does cause bad things but that God is still present in the midst of tragedy.

The next context is that we have faith in death. This is a faith that we emphasize every time we have a memorial service or funeral. We have faith that this life as we know it is only part of existence and that there is something glorious that happens when we leave this life. Though I don't fully understand how it works, I have faith that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus have reconnected us back to God. This is a connection that some call eternal life.

Death comes to all of us. Sometimes we see it coming and faith in death helps us overcome the fears of the unknown. Sometimes death is sudden, and faith in death helps us through the grieving process for those that we miss.

The Bible shares images of what happens after death. I am not one of those that has a firm conviction or even a deep understanding of life after death, but I have faith that it is real and that it is wonderful. Even though there is no scientific evidence, my

personal spirituality clings to a faith that our relationship with God and our relationships with others continue after the event that we call death.

So, we have faith during awful times, faith in death, and finally, the third context for faith is in the normal ups and downs of life. This type of faith may be during financial difficulty or the loss of a job. It may be during inter-personal strife or even the ending of an important relationship. It may be in times of depression, anxiety or low self-esteem. It may be when life just seems out of control. It may even be when we are struggling to discern if God is calling us into new ministry. There are a lot of things that can fit into this context that I am calling the normal ups and downs of life.

And, by calling them “normal” I do not mean to call them insignificant or unimportant. Instead, by normal, I mean to point out the common experiences that we all share in life. I find some personal solace in knowing that almost everyone else has experienced these same “normal” ups and downs. These are everyday experiences that we all share and by extension this means that we all share an everyday faith.

This is an everyday faith that we are not the center of the universe, God is. This is an everyday faith that the treasures of this life are less important than the treasures of heaven. This is an everyday faith that we needn't sweat the small stuff, and that it's all small stuff. And for me, when I wake up in the middle of the night and fret about things, everyday faith is remembering that the night will pass and in the morning things will not seem as dire. And, I'm guessing that you each have your own stories about everyday faith.

As I conclude, here are some words about every day faith by Wendell Berry in his poem called “The Peace of Wild Things”.

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*