

A Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Beautiful words given to the Hebrews. Poetic. Reassuring. Oft repeated and oft memorized because this succinct little two-part sentence seems to be the best we can come up with to define or explain faith. Much has, and will be, written...much has, and will be said...about how we are (and are not) to interpret and understand and incorporate this word picture of what faith is. And yet, what I bring to you on this morning, in this moment and in this place, is that this thing we call faith can at times be so utterly undefinable, such incredibly hard work, that we feel hard pressed to keep it from slipping away entirely.

Ironically, faith is a common word in our everyday parlance. We know that the word faith is used to describe different branches – different approaches and systems - of religious belief. The Christian faith...the Jewish faith...the Muslim faith. Sometimes we say someone is of “a different faith tradition” and that phrase has even been erroneously co-opted in current culture to refer to someone of another denomination in the Christian faith. In our prayer book (page 845, if you would like to check it out...AFTER the service...) is a section called “An Outline of the Faith: Commonly Called the Catechism.” Although it does not purport to answer every question, our outline of the faith does delineate what we as members of the Episcopal Church and the broader Anglican Communion believe.

Faith is an everyday word that we use in *all* manner of dealings in our life. A teacher expresses faith that her class will have their reports completed by the deadline. We express our faith in our children’s good judgment, in our spouse’s commitment to our marriage, in our doctor’s ability to treat our disease.

We know our faith in God is belief, yet not entirely belief. Is conviction, but not entirely conviction. Is trust, yet not entirely trust. And we know that when we speak of our faith in God - even our shared faith - although we are a people of faith, it feels incredibly personal, most times affirming and uplifting, sometimes bleak and almost – okay, completely – impossible. Rather than try to hammer out an easy answer – a definition of the undefinable – an ultimately ineffective explanation of holy mystery – I would like, ever so briefly, to dwell on that dark and frustrating and frightening place where it can **feel** like our faith may be nothing more than an illusion.

We gather this morning, sandwiched – and I’m certain it is a holy sandwich – between a wedding yesterday and a funeral tomorrow. Three days, three occasions

in the church...The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, The Holy Eucharist comprising The Word of God and The Holy Communion, and The Burial of the Dead. Weddings are well and truly joyous celebrations. In the church, two people come together *in the presence of God*, to proclaim their love and make promises to God and to one another. Marriage, the liturgy says, was a bond and covenant established by God in creation and signifies to us the union between Christ and his Church. We pray for the enduring love and caring of the couple for one another, and that God will always be with them, supporting and sustaining them.....We have faith that this *will* be so. And then one day you learn that dear friends, one of your children or your siblings, even you, yourself, will no longer be able to sustain that marriage. There is pain, and there is heartache, and there is despair... "Why," you might wonder, "did I believe – why did I have faith – that this would be as was promised?" What good were all those words that were said? Why did God not do what I had faith God would do?"

And if our faith is shaken when someone we love faces divorce, it can be literally blown apart when a friend, a loved one, a stranger – like all those little strangers at Sandy Hook Elementary School – dies. The Rite of Burial begins "I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord. Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he die." I am fully aware that these are exactly the words we need to hear at exactly the moment we need to hear them, because when someone dies and is no longer in the only life *we* know and comprehend – in *that* moment – it is awfully hard to dredge up the faith we so readily profess on the easy days. My sister, my mother, my husband or wife, my friend is gone. How could I possibly know what has become of them? Or, if I am honest, how could I have fooled myself into believing this was all somehow okay? I had faith in a god who would alleviate the suffering, protect the children, heal the heartache...where is that god now? What good did faith do anyone?

There have been hundreds – possibly thousands – of pithy statements made regarding faith, which to my mind only speaks to our struggle to truly understand this challenging and illusive idea. "The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty," some say. And, "We mistakenly understand faith when we imagine that having faith enables us to avoid or overcome suffering." Or, "Trusting in our own faith, rather than in the One who is the object of our faith is not faith at all." All of these statements, and so many like them, define faith from the negative...essentially telling us what it is not, rather than what it is.

I am standing here this morning in a state of utter vulnerability. It feels to me like we at Grace Church are being, as they say, beset on all sides by those aspects of life

and living that make us weary and heart-heavy. We are living with death...dissolution of relationships...the inherent feeling of defenselessness that comes with cancer...the struggle to accept the need to let go of things long-cherished that comes with age and declining health...the despair that seeps in when our hopes for change – in ourselves and others – seem no longer possible. Why does that render me vulnerable? Because in times and circumstances such as these, there is no choice but to recognize our inherent inability to put everything right – to stop the ravages and disappointments of aging and disease, to mend heartache, to love away despair and grief. At times such as this, it is very difficult to find strength...and it is *very* difficult to see how our fragile and vulnerable faith – the puny size, perhaps, of a mustard seed – will sustain us.

I have well and truly wrestled with how we speak of, know of, *live in* faith. What an unexpected gift it is that the emptiness and lack of defenses that define vulnerability are the same conditions that allow moments of grace to pierce the soul.

For example, from this morning's readings came the realization – or at least the very fervent hope – that God has faith in us. In Isaiah God says, Enough, already, with the burnt offerings and the running around in the temple burning incense and all the ceremonies. All that I ask is that you “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” God wants not for himself, but for the people *to care for one another*. You can *do* this. I have faith in you.

In telling the “little flock” to “make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys,” Jesus is not talking about attire nor possessions, but filling one's life with care and compassion, and that very same seeking after justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphans and widows – acting in love for all of God's creation. Those are the things that nothing and no one can ever destroy. Treasure others, and your heart will lead you to the life God has created *you* to live...the life God has *faith* you *can* live.

We remember Abraham is an exemplar of faith. He had faith that God would provide an old man and an old woman with a son. He was one of many whose faith led them forward, even knowing they would never live to see what had been promised. He was the one in whom we see a faith in God so strong he was ready to offer up his son in sacrifice. Did you pick up the line that said Abraham considered God, who had made all these promises, *faithful*?

My comfort in the reassurance of God's faithfulness to all of God's people did not resolve what was beginning to feel like a stubborn and desperate need to shed even meager light on how we are called to know faith. All the while, there was a song

playing unbidden in my head, and when it finally became too annoying to ignore, I listened. It was my dad's voice I heard singing, and my heart was lightened momentarily to remember that for such a wee, little man – with no self-confidence – his rich, deep voice could breathe life into a song. I was hearing him sing “My Faith Looks Up to Thee” and I searched out the words so I could get him past the first two lines. I feel I owe a debt of gratitude to dad, for reminding me, but more so to Ray Palmer, who wrote those words sometime during the well over a hundred years ago. Palmer's words helped me to realize it is *exactly* all of our vulnerabilities we bring to God...*through* our faith. “My faith looks up to thee, thou Lamb of Calvary,” the hymn begins...and then the words offer up guilt and fainting heart, and ask for Christ's presence “while life's dark maze I tread and griefs around me spread.” Imperfection, insecurity, vulnerability offered up in faith to the Divine Savior, son of a God who has such great faith in those who through the Word were created that he sent his only begotten to live and love and die among us.

I offered you this morning, in the silent meditation, a few words from author, educator and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor...who has been given the gift of saying what we all wish we could say if we were only more eloquent. “Faith is not a well-fluffed nest, or a well-defended castle high on a hill.” In other words, it is neither comfortable nor unassailable. “It is more like a rope bridge over a scenic gorge, sturdy but swinging back and forth, with plenty of light and plenty of air but precious little to hang on to except the stories you have heard: that it is the best and only way across, that it is possible, that it will bear your weight. All you have to do is believe in the bridge more than you believe in the gorge...”

The metaphor is a powerful one, I think. The bridge is safe, but not immovable...faith will never harm you, though it can feel as though it waxes and wanes. There is plenty of light to see and air to breathe. We can live and breathe and having our being in faith. It will bear our weight – and the weight of our anxieties and our vulnerability. All you have to do is believe...in something you have not yourself tested nor proven nor fully explained, but only heard about...and believe more than you trust and believe in anything else.

The last of Brown-Taylor's words are not printed in the bulletin, in part due to lack of space...but even more because I wanted to share them with you. “All you have to do is believe in the bridge more than you believe in the gorge,” she writes, “but fortunately *you do not have to believe all by yourself*. There are others to believe *with* you, and even some to believe it *for* you when your own belief wears thin. They have crossed the bridge ahead of you and are waiting on the other side. You can talk to them if you like as you step into the air, putting one foot ahead of the other.”

We are not alone.

And so, when life assails and grieving overwhelms us, when fear and doubt have ripped our faith to shreds, I hold out my hand to you, and you to me, and we all hold out our hands to one another. And we will walk together back into faith. We will carry one another right to the table where we offer ourselves – even when all we have to offer is guilt and fainting heart and sin and unbelief – to the God who has such faith in each of us that he will always feed us...to the God who *loves* us all so much – no matter what – that he gave us one another. Amen.