

Trinity Church (ELCA)

Stephens City, Virginia

Sunday's Sermon

June 19, 2016

The Rev. Mr. Cameron P. Keyser

Pentecost 5-C

We talk a lot in church about this thing we call 'faith.' Webster's lists a bunch of synonyms: confidence, reliance, trust, conviction, assurance...loyalty, allegiance, belief...It's a central notion to Christianity – taught by Jesus himself as an act of trust and self-abandonment in which we no longer rely on our own strength and intellect, but commit to the power and guiding word of him in whom we believe.

Since the Protestant Reformation, however, it's been an object of major theological disagreement in Western Christianity settled – more or less – by 'The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification:' a document created, and agreed to, in 1999 by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation which says that we now share 'a common understanding of our justification by God's Grace through faith in Christ.'

To anybody who really cares, this essentially resolves a 500-year-old conflict which was at the root of the Protestant Reformation. All that's fine and good, but Jesus didn't ask Peter in Luke 9 who 'folks thought he was' – although that's how the disciples initially responded – he asked 'Who do you say that I am?' Ecumenical agreements, theological dissertations and all that are fine – but, what is 'faith' for you? That's all that really matters.

As our graduates will soon learn, 'faith' will be a major player in their lives from now-on. Whether you've graduated from Pre-School to 1st grade like Rylan, or from college to the FBI, like Tyler: the notion of 'faith' is going to become less a 'cognitive' – that is an 'intellectual' or 'rational' process of your *brain* - and more a radical, quite *un*-rational expression of your *heart*.

Up to now, you've had – waxing and waning, I'm sure: faith in yourself, and in your parents...faith – which is really based more on 'experience' than 'faith:' that the sun will be up in the morning before you are. But, increasingly – even for Rylan and Jasemine – your 'faith' – in every *one* and every *thing* – will be called into question.

Do you have 'faith' in the Justice System? Then, would you volunteer to push the switch to electrocute a

total stranger? *Not* the guy who murdered your wife or raped your daughter – but a complete and total stranger? Do you have *that* much faith in the truth of the jury's verdict...or might the trial have been more about the skill of the Prosecutor painstakingly plotting and maneuvering the testimony to suit his version of the 'facts?'

What about your spouse: is he or she really – in your mind – 'faithful' until proven otherwise, or do you harbor unsupported, irrational 'fear' that your faith in them is being subverted?

What about friends? And co-workers? Teachers...even pastors? What – or in *whom* – do you have 'faith?' It's a never-ending human emotional challenge. Dr. Seuss even talks about it: '*You'll get mixed up, of course, as you already know. You'll get mixed up with many strange birds as you go. So be sure when you step. Step with care and great tact and remember that Life's a Great Balancing Act.*'

Jesus calls us to have 'faith' – trust, confidence, reliance – in him. '*In*' him – not just '*with*' him or '*because* of him' – but '*in*' him: something much deeper than just what the gray matter in your brain concludes.

There's an old story about a famous tightrope walker who strung a wire across Niagara Falls: 3,409 feet long – about 2/3rds of a mile; and as 10,000 people watched, he inched his way from one side to the other.

The crowd went wild as the tightrope walker shouted: 'Do you believe in me?'

'*We believe! We believe!*', the crowd thundered back.

'Well, I'm going *back* across the tightrope,' he yelled – 'but this time I'm going to carry someone on my back! Do you believe I can do that?'

The crowd yelled back, '*We believe! We believe!*' 'OK!,' he smiled. 'Which one of you will it be?'

10-thousand people – and not one was willing to apply what they *professed* to believe with what they really *felt*.

Listen to the Gospel lesson this morning: 'A man who had many demons met Jesus, and immediately shouted: "What have you to do with me, Jesus? I know who you are: Son of the Most High God:" a confession of

faith at least as strong – and surely much more surprising than Peter’s – from a demon: a messenger from hell, Satan’s minion...a bit better classified and categorized, but as real today as then.

We may *say* that Jesus is the Son of God Sunday in and Sunday out - but does our faith surpass that of demons? Are we willing trust our lives to him – to follow him no matter what it costs?

That’s an unanswerable question – until the ‘rubber hits the road’ in your life...until you – as a person – have exhausted all your quite ample intellectual, physical, emotional, and mental resources...until you are – literally - at the end of your rope: fighting the demon of alcoholism or greed...depression or heartbreak - the demon of death which is at all times staring each of us in the face. You’ll never be able to answer that question fully without hesitation or second guessing until the times comes...until you ‘crater out’ and hit the bottom of the bottom in your life...and, even then, it’s likely to be – like the father of the boy with the “unclean” spirit in Mark 9 who said to Jesus: with all the faith he could possibly muster: ‘I *believe!* Help my *unbelief!*’

The Book of Hebrews defines ‘faith’ as ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’ - which is, probably, the best definition any of us could come up with: ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’

Scientists have ‘faith’ in their hypothesis – until it proves wrong...pilots have ‘faith’ in their anywhere from 75 to 575 ton airplanes as well: until an unexplained malfunction sends them hurtling to earth at 400 miles an hour.

Read a story about a man so depressed couldn't even get out of bed: powerful man – a CEO type - yet absolutely overwhelmed: crushed, beaten, conquered, by the pressures of his life...Alone in a hotel room far from home, he agonizes about everything – just as he has all his life: neurotically stewing: over his business, his investments, his decisions, his family, his health, even, his dogs. Filled with anxiety, completely immobilized,

paralyzed by his emotional despair – praying without even realizing it – he senses a voice in his heart: 'It doesn't *have to be* this way!'

That is the message of this Gospel story and every other Gospel story: 'It doesn't *have to be* this way!' That's why Jesus came in the first place: to deliver us, to free us, to change us and to save us, and show us that 'it doesn't *have to be* that way.'

John 3:17: ‘God didn’t send the Son into the world to *condemn* the world – or us - but in order that the world might be *saved* - from our selfish, human nature.

The guy is still prone to anxiety, and still has to work hard to overcome it. but, now he has a source of strength to help – a source that reminds us “*who* we are and *whose* we are...”

It's curious that the English word ‘dog’ spelled backwards is ‘g-o-d’ – and even more curious that the word ‘evil’ spelled backwards is ‘l-i-v-e.’ And indeed, evil destroys our living. Life is always diminished - if not wiped completely out – where we let the demons be in control.

For whatever the reason, God does not simply wave a magic wand to eliminate evil. As Harold Kushner would propose in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: maybe he has a purpose that he doesn’t make us privy to. Or, maybe he can’t...or, maybe he just *hasn’t...yet*. Rooting out evil takes time, takes effort, and takes above all sacrifice: it did from God on the cross. It does from us in our everyday lives.

In today’s lesson, Jesus was chased away by the townsfolk - but the healed man stayed - at Jesus’ instructions - and kept on talking about what Jesus had done. That’s our role as well. Lots of people try to chase Jesus away. Our job is to hang around and keep talking – keep living, keep planting the seeds of God’s Good News for everyone: living our lives within a source that when we walk the tightrope of life we really *can* have ‘faith. Or, as close to it as we can get. Amen.

Sources Consulted

Surpassing the Faith of Demons, Bryn MacPhail
Scott Hozzee, Comments and Observations
e-sermons.com