

“Faith is Trust”

September 4, 2022

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.’”

As it relates to Christian belief, faith is a glorious word, one with a fantastic significance. After healing people, Jesus frequently said *“go, your faith has made you well.”* St. Paul will tell us in Ephesians, *“for by grace you’ve been saved by faith.”* Again, in Galatians, Paul tells us *“...we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”* All told, the word “faith” appears up to 250 times in your New Testament, not counting derivations like faithful or faithfulness. So we know that faith is important...redemptive even. But what IS it?

If you were to try to define it, would you say? Is faith a feeling? Is faith some commodity which can be bought or sold or transferred between two parties? Is faith something we can summon up from within us whenever we need it? Perhaps, if asked to define faith, you’d default to an old standard pastor’s line. You see, whenever some question is really, really tough, we pastors have a notorious penchant to ambiguously utter “it’s a mystery of God” as though that answers everything. But while there are some things which remain for God alone to know, faith isn’t one of them.

To begin with, we must understand that faith is entirely a gift. It isn’t something we earn nor can we work our way into having it. However, faith comes to us, be it a granule as small as a mustard seed or in sufficient amount to move a mountain, faith is always the gift of God. Unfortunately, though, simply recognizing faith as God’s gift to us isn’t really defining it. I can receive a package on Christmas day and know that it’s been given to me. I can look on the tag and clearly see the name of the person who gave it to me. But unless I unwrap it and look inside, it’s remains completely unknown to me. And so that’s what I’m hopeful my next three sermons will do. Unwrap the gift of faith God gives us so that we’ll be able to see it more clearly in our lives. Karl Barth puts forward the idea in his work *Church Dogmatics in Outline* that faith has three distinct parts. Barth suggests that faith consists of trust, knowledge and confession. Today we’re going to talk about faith as trust.

In our reading from the New Testament, so too do we see trust at work. In John chapter three, Nicodemus, a Pharisee comes to Jesus Christ under cover of nightfall. Nicodemus has seen many things, many wonders performed by Jesus Christ. He knows this is a man of power, most likely, a man of God’s own choosing. And yet he comes under the cloak of night. We’re bound to wonder why he tries to hide his arrival. It makes sense when we consider that Nicodemus is a leader of the Pharisees and they’re not Jesus’ biggest fans. In fact, Jesus just upset the applecart by upending the money changers table in the Temple Courtyard. Not exactly the kind of behavior which ingratiates one to the powers-that-be. In Mark’s Gospel, this is the very point that the leaders of

the Jews, both Pharisees and Sadducees alike began plotting to kill Jesus. So, Nicodemus' colleagues, his friends, the guys he talked with and did business with, they'd made up their minds. This Jesus needs to GO. And so people who sympathized with Jesus weren't too well thought of either. To the rest of the Pharisees, disciples of Jesus Christ had set their teeth against God. So if Nicodemus was caught or seen by anyone, anyone at all, things would've gotten quite difficult for him. Perhaps even his livelihood or his life was at stake. But he comes nonetheless. Even though it's the dark of night, he seeks out Jesus. He's seen the wonders Jesus is doing. He's heard the talk. He must know more about this strange man from Nazareth. If but for a moment, he holds enough trust to step forward to talk to Jesus.

I wonder what those anxious minutes of internal debate were like inside his head before Nicodemus laced up his sandals and ventured out on a trip which would ultimately change the course of his life? You see, I just don't believe that when you trust God in faith that there isn't some part of you which still questions what's going on. Even though the Old Testament says that upon hearing the call of God to wander from Haran into Canaan, Abraham just went, I've got to figure he himself had doubts. As God reveals himself to Moses, telling him to lead the people into the promised land, we know HE had great concerns, he voiced them to God directly. He didn't just say "yes sir" and return to Egypt to help out. The trust issued by faith doesn't magically eliminate all our doubts. They remain sometimes. However, faith does have the ability to overcome them in such a way as to move you forward. When God imparts faith to us, it momentarily quiets the doubts. Suspends the disbelief so that we move into action. We trust, and we move forward.

It worked that way with Nicodemus. He goes. Chats with Jesus. Sure, he doesn't quite get it all, not yet at least. But in that encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus' life is forever altered in a very, very good way. In the Gospel of John, chapter 19, old Nicodemus shows up yet again, except this time in the full light of day. Jesus has died at this point in the Gospel and is yet to be raised but here is Nicodemus bringing along a hundred pounds of aloe and myrrh. Can you imagine what his friends would've thought at this sight? Here is Nicodemus showing up to support his dead friend...Jesus. The one his old friends plotted to kill. Yet here he was, willing to put his name, reputation and livelihood on the line. It was a great act of trust. Trust in the person and the promises of Jesus. But it's important to recall, he wasn't able to do that in the beginning.

Trust in God is something that builds and strengthens over time. During Bible School one year, Ed Albert was talking about the first time he repelled out of a helicopter. Ed remembered that as he was waiting there, inside the helicopter, he wasn't quite sure that it would all work. But somehow, somehow, over the side he went. He survived. As he continued to do this, he became more confident until he got to the point where he didn't really even fret. Although our faith be but small at first, the God that put it there is still working, still strengthening our trust in him by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now I want to take just a moment to put forward couple of examples of a false kind of faith, a pseudo-trust if you will. Now let's say that someone comes up to you and says, "Hey give me \$100, you trust me...right?" And this isn't just anyone off the streets, it's a lifelong friend who's established themselves as being an upstanding member of the community. They've given you their word a dozen times and come through on every single occasion. Now let's just say for the sake of argument you happen to have a crisp \$100 bill right there just burning a hole in your pocket. Maybe you were hopeful to buy a toy or a tech product with it. You don't need it for anything important like food or rent. Look, you can tell your friend that you trust them, but if you don't give them that \$100 do you really? Of course, you don't. Your words say yes but everything else screams NO! Or what if you gave them that \$100, trusting only that they'd return it to you with interest? And yes, that would be nice wouldn't it? But that wasn't promised. Here we discover another false kind of trust. You aren't really trusting at all if you assume a particular outcome.

I can't say I trust God if I condition it by trying to predetermine the outcomes. As in, God, I'm going to do this, but in return I expect to win the lottery or get out of this jam. It's easy to trust in a God who I expect to make all my dreams come true. But that really isn't trust. God would then be little more than a genie in a bottle. That isn't to imply trusting God with our lives, our money, our decisions is a bad idea. But if we were to try to confine the outcome of that trust according to what we want, we'd sell ourselves, and God, short in the process. You see our dreams pale in comparison to the future God has in store for us! Real trust is

abandoning an imagined future of our own construction, surrendering it to God with the belief that he knows what's best for us, even better than we do.

Faith isn't merely some knowledge you store in the back of your mind. It isn't entirely some feeling that makes you warm and giddy all the time. *Faith is trust in God. A trust that God is true to all His promises and that He holds our best interests in His heart.* Unlike us, God isn't capable of lying. When God issues His Word, it is rock solid, steady, assured. God isn't some con man making deals He has no intention of keeping. God's Word is true. Unlike us, God isn't constrained by circumstance. There's no getting in the way of God. No plans of God are waylaid by unforeseen events. No promises of God are overcome by anything at all for God has the power and the freedom to ensure that His will always come to pass. Unlike us, God isn't confined to operating within the bounds of time. God is timeless, which means that He can make pledges to us that extend beyond the restraints of even our mortal lives. He can promise us an eternal life in Him because only He is eternal.

What it all boils down to is this – in all of time and space, in all the universe, there is only one thing really worthy of our trust. And it isn't a thing, it's a person, Jesus, Son of God. In and through our trust of Him, we experience the fireworks of faith. Fears are quelled. Anxieties are calmed. Peace and joy and love reign in our hearts.

Why? Because in His gift of faith to us, we're able to trust that God is everything He claims Himself to be. And what He claims to have for us is an eternal love. And don't take my word on it. Take His. You'll be glad you did.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.