

**Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost**  
**August 7, 2016**  
**Marley United Methodist Church, Glen Burnie MD**

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Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20  
Psalm 50: 1-8, 22-23  
Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16\*  
Luke 12: 32-40\*

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**Faith for Life**

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen

Faith causes a great deal of anxiety for many of those who seek to follow Jesus. People worry about whether they have got enough of it. Perhaps it is not surprising--people who are seeking salvation and acceptance by God are inevitably going to be concerned with whatever it takes to be saved and accepted by God, so if it is Works – doing the right thing – that saves you, they will be worried about whether they've done enough of the right kind of works, and if it is faith that saves us, then they will be worried about whether they've got enough faith.

We evangelical protestants have put great emphasis on salvation being by faith and not by works, and so it is not surprising that, among us, people would then be concerned about their faith. Does it measure up? Have I got enough? How much is enough? How do I get more? How can I banish doubts that eat away at my faith?

The time-honored and traditional practice of anointing with oil and laying on of hands with prayer for healing has fallen into disrepute amongst most Protestants because some evangelists had the rather nasty habit of blaming any non-healings on a lack of sufficient faith in the recipient. "You need more faith to experience God's healing." Think about it for a minute –

what kind of a put-down is it to tell someone, explicitly or by implication, that they are a failure as a Christian because they don't even have enough faith to measure up to the size of a mustard seed?

People are made to feel guilty about their own ongoing sickness or brokenness, and even guiltier about the inadequacy of their faith. "If I haven't got enough faith to be healed, perhaps I haven't got enough to be saved either."

The Scriptures we heard speak to this: firstly, and very directly, in our gospel reading we heard Jesus say, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Hear that? "Do not be afraid." It is not really a command though, it's more of a reassurance. Don't be afraid, there is nothing to worry about. Relax. Chill out--it's all been sorted out and taken care of. No worries. Why? Because "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

- God wants to give you the kingdom.
- God delights to give you the kingdom.
- God is jumping out of his skin to give you the kingdom.
- It would be easier for you to flap your wings and fly than it would be to get God to stop trying to give you the kingdom.

So where does faith come into all that? Well, it doesn't matter how much somebody wants to give you something, if you don't trust them, if you don't have faith in them, then you won't take anything they offer you. You know this in plenty of other situations in your life.

For example: if you are driving down the road and it is pouring rain, and you see someone who's got caught out without an umbrella or coat, what happens if you pull over to offer them a ride? Well, if you are strangers to each other, and especially if you, the driver, are a man and the person caught in the rain is a woman, then very probably, no matter how cold and wet it is and no matter how sincere you are in your offer to help, she's going to refuse your offer. Why? She doesn't know you, so she doesn't trust you--she has no faith in you. There is no way to communicate the benevolence of your intentions in that situation and the more you try the

more suspicious she will become. She could have been saved from getting soaked, but that would have required faith, and she had no reason to put her faith in you.

So what does it mean for us to have saving faith in God? It simply means that when God pulls over and offers us a lift to the Promised Land that we trust God enough to get in. Now I'm not, for even a moment, suggesting that you should start hopping trustingly into cars with random strangers, or necessarily stopping to pick them up either. Such faith or trust in others has to be earned. If it was me who pulled over and offered you a lift when you were stuck in the rain, you'd probably hop in without the slightest hesitation. At least I'd like to think you would anyway! Because you know me, and you know that I'm not going to take advantage of you. I have, I hope, earned that much trust from you. So the question before us is 'has God earned your trust?'

I think these illustrations are helpful because they give us some insight into what the opposite of putting your faith in God might be. The opposite is not neutral; it is distrust. If you won't hop in when God offers you a lift, it is because you suspect that God might have hidden malicious intentions; that God might be going to take advantage of your faith and rip you off or abuse you or not follow through and keep his promises. And that might be fair enough. Because even though God does apparently offer us the gift for free, we do seem to be asked for rather more than accepting a free ride, don't we?

God always seems to say, "Happy to take you there, for sure, but there are a few things you won't be able to take with you, and a few attitudes and patterns of behavior you'll be needing to change if you're going to get along when you get there." So the question is, is this the old bait and switch--is God just being sneaky and promising us a free ride to suck us in before starting to up the ante? And when we look at these words from Jesus, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father is well pleased to give you the kingdom", the very next words are, "Sell your possessions, and give to the poor." So, can God be trusted?

When we turn over to the reading we heard from the letter to the Hebrews, this question reappears from another angle. In Hebrews 11, there is a big list of past heroes of faith and examples of their faithfulness to God. We only heard a little bit this morning, a bit about Abraham, but there is a much longer list there. And as it said in the bit we heard, “all of these (heroes) died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” In other words, they put their trust in promises that God made and then went to their graves without seeing those promises fulfilled. So was their faith in vain?

Well, the author of the letter is adamant that it wasn't, but that's easy for him to say. None of the people he uses as an example are about to jump up and contradict him, are they? It certainly gives more poignancy to his opening definition of faith: “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Some of them will remain unseen even as you go to your grave. But don't get too caught up in this definition, because it easily leads you back to the idea of faith being something measurable, and whether you have enough of it to earn the assurance and conviction of God's promises.

The writer to the Hebrews uses an interesting word play throughout this passage. He slides back and forth between the idea of “faith” and that of “faithfulness”. Almost without our being aware of it, we are led to realize that faith is not something you have more or less of, it is something you do. Faith and faithfulness blur into one. How much faith do you have? Well, how loyal are you? How faithfully are you following? Do you hop in when Jesus says hop in, or do you stand back suspiciously and weigh up the risks? Do you hold out your hand willingly when Jesus says, “This is my body, take and eat,” or do you shy away, concerned that it might be a trap that will cause you to actually change, bring the world as you know it crashing down around your ears?

Now, of course, I can't answer these questions for you. And, as our reading from the letter to the Hebrews suggests, I also can't stand up here and tell you that everyone who has ever trusted God has lived to see their trust borne out and everything they anticipated from God fulfilled; because that would not be true – and you would know better.

What I can tell you, and what I think this list of ancient faith stories in the letter is telling you, is that I have not been ripped off or abused by God. Sure, much has been asked of me. I'm among those who would be a bit wary of calling it a free ride. It may have cost me nothing, but it has demanded a lot from me. I thought I'd be touring Europe or sailing the Atlantic or seeing the Rockies through the windshield of a motorhome, but here I am serving as a preacher and as a Spiritual Director for Weekend Retreats instead. It has demanded a lot from me. But what I can say is that I have found it consistently worth it to give up those things to serve Jesus.

The old hymn *Trust and Obey*, which we will sing later, says in the third verse: "But we never can prove the delights of his love until all on the altar we lay; for the favor he shows and the joy he bestows are for them who will trust and obey". (UMH #467)

You see, faithful discipleship is its own reward. It is not easy. It is sometimes quite painful and difficult. But I don't think there are any easy alternatives you could choose anyway. Certainly when you look closely at the lives of the fabulously wealthy and beautiful or the flagrantly self-indulgent they don't show us any evidence of being filled with joy and peace and contentment, do they?

Putting my faith in God, through Christ, in the power of the Spirit, by getting on board and taking one faithful step at a time, even if often interspersed by a some unfaithful and backwards ones, I have found that I have gradually become a different person, a person more like what I want to be, more like what I know I should be, and hopefully more like the person I was created to be.

It's just one faithful step at a time, one little step of confidence in things hoped for, of conviction of things not seen, often taken in the face of considerable doubt and uncertainty. Doubt and uncertainty are not the opposite of faith, they are the ground in which faith grows. Like a beautiful ring where the diamond is faith, doubt and uncertainty are the setting which displays faith in all its glory.

I can't tell you how it will all work out for you, or for me. But then, neither could Abraham. All I can say is it's a good ride. So why not hop on board and see where he takes you?

Amen

## **Proper Preface**

We give you all thanks and praise, O God,  
for it is your good pleasure to give the Kingdom to us.

Through your law and prophets  
you called your people from their hypocrisy.

Through Jesus Christ you called us to travel lightly  
as strangers and foreigners on the earth,  
putting our hopes in you alone  
and always ready to welcome your future.

When he was killed you raised him to new life  
so that he might prepare a new world  
for those who put their faith in your promises,  
seeking not to gain riches on earth  
but treasuring heaven in their hearts.

And, so with your people on earth and all the company of  
heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

## **Commission & Benediction**

Go now like those prepared for the Lord to return.  
Cease to do evil, learn to do good;  
seek justice, rescue the oppressed.  
Give freely to those in need  
and let your treasure be in the things of heaven

And may God not be ashamed to be called your God;  
May Christ Jesus find you attentive and well prepared;  
And may the Holy Spirit give you the assurance  
of all that has been promised to you.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,  
*In the name of Christ. Amen.*