

Called to be a Community of Faith

Our first reading is from Hebrews, chapter 11, verses 1 through 3, and verses 23 through 34, which can be found on page 225 in the New Testament section of your pew bible. Hebrews, chapter 11, beginning with the 1st verse. Listen for God's word to you.

Hebrews 11:1–3, 23–34 (NRSV)

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

²³ By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the

Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. ²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. ³² And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church. **Thanks be to God.**

CHILDREN'S SERMON

What is this? Do you know what this is?

That's right, it's a scarf that we can use as a blindfold.

When we do something for the very first time it can be a little bit scary.

Do you remember your very first day at school? One of your parents probably went in with you to help you find your room and meet your teacher.

When you got on a bicycle for the first time, someone probably walked along beside you and helped hold you up at the very beginning. That gave you confidence and soon you were riding on your own.

When you went swimming for the first time, you didn't just go out and jump in the pool, did you? No, there was someone with you to hold you up until you could swim on your own.

It really helps if we have someone we trust to be with us when we are about to do something we have never done before.

Today, I brought a blindfold. What if I were to ask one of you to put on this blindfold and find your way to the back of the room and bring a hymnal back to me? How do you think you might feel? Would you be worried that you might bump into something and hurt yourself? Would you be afraid that others might laugh at you when you went the wrong direction? What if I said that I would go with you and hold your hand? You trust me, don't you? I will be with you every step. How does that make you feel? Who would like to try it? OK, let's go.

This blindfolded journey is kind of like the way we go through life. God is with us all the time and though we can't see God, we can trust that God is there. That is called faith. And today we are going to explore what it means to be a community of faith; people who put their trust in God.

Let's pray. God we thank you that though we can't always see you we can trust that you are with us, taking care of us, and guiding us along the way. Help us to trust you. Strengthen our faith. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Called to Be a Community of Faith

Our second reading is from Romans, chapter 9, verse 30 through chapter 10, verse 17, which can be found on page 159 in the New Testament section of your pew bible. Romans, chapter 9, beginning with the 30th verse. Listen for God's word to you.

Romans 9:30–10:17 (NRSV)

³⁰ What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; ³¹ but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. ³² Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ as it is written, "See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." ¹ Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ² I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. ⁵ Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does

these things will live by them.”⁶ But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down)⁷ “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);⁹ because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.¹⁰ For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.¹¹ The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.¹³ For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”¹⁴ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”¹⁶ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?”¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church. **Thanks be to God.**

During this Lenten season we are exploring the statement that appears again and again in our denomination's constitution that we are called to be a community of faith, a community of hope, a community of love, and a community of witness.

Last Sunday we explored what it means to be a covenant community; the commitment we make to one another. Our commitment to this community requires something of us. It demands something of us. Membership comes with certain responsibilities. It's a sacrificial commitment to others and to God; which means it's not all about us.

We are called to serve, not to be served. We are called to share the gifts that we've been given with this community. When we are at our best, our participation in this community is not about what we receive but about what we give and share, not only to one another, but also to God. It's about being with and for one another; making ourselves available to one another, sharing each other's joys and shouldering one another's burdens. That's what it means to be a part of this covenant community.

Today I want to explore what it means to be a community of faith; for it is our faith that unites us. But what exactly is faith?

There are many who laugh at organized religion these days; those who believe in God. They say, “You can’t prove that God exists. You can’t prove that there is life after death. And if you can’t prove it, then all it is, is wishful thinking, and I’m not buying it. You can’t prove that Jesus did miracles. You can’t prove that Jesus walked on water. You can’t prove that Jesus died on a cross. You can’t prove that Jesus rose from the dead.” And what do you say to that?

Well, I would say, “You’re right, I can’t prove it. But that doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

And then they’ll quote Mark Twain, who once said, “Faith is believing what you know isn’t true.” And I would respond, “That’s not faith, that’s foolishness. Faith is believing something that can’t be proven with certainty.”

And that’s when they might point to science. “I believe in science. Science helps us understand the world around us. It examines the evidence, tests our hypotheses, and proves our theories. If science can’t

prove that there is a god, then I don't believe that there is a god. And so, your faith is meaningless."

And, up to a point, I would agree with them. We can't prove that God exists. That's why we call it faith and not certainty. But just because we can't prove something, just because we can't see something, that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist; that doesn't mean that it's not true. We all have our doubts. And we don't need to be afraid of our doubts. You can't have faith without doubt. Faith and doubt go together. They work hand in hand. Doubt is a part of faith. It's the other side of the coin. But just because we can't prove that God exists, that doesn't mean that our faith is futile, because neither can anyone prove that God *doesn't* exist.

Ultimately, the existence of God is something that can't be proven either way. To believe it or not is a matter of choice, usually based on intuition, knowledge and experience. Those who, after weighing the evidence and the testimony of others, come to believe that God exists, they are called *theists*. Those who, after weighing the evidence and the testimony of others, come to believe that God doesn't exist, they are called *atheists*. And those who can't make a decision or don't really care one way or the

other or don't think it really matters are called *agnostics*. But the atheist cannot be absolutely certain that God doesn't exist just like the theist can't be absolutely certain that God does exist. Again, faith is believing something to be true even though you can't prove it with certainty.

All of us live by faith. Think about all the things you did today. How many of them involved faith? Almost everything!

Think about your breakfast. You trusted that your breakfast would nourish you rather than harm you which is why you ate it. But it could have been poisoned. Or, it could have been contaminated with deadly bacteria. Eating it was an act of faith.

When you got in your car and rode to church, you trusted that your engine would be able to contain the thousands of little gas explosions that push the pistons and make your car move. You trusted that those explosions wouldn't get out of control and hurt you. That was an act of faith.

If you drove over or under a bridge on your way to church, you trusted that the bridge would not collapse either beneath you or on top of you,

although there is evidence that sometimes bridges collapse and people are killed. You trusted that bridge. And that was an act of faith.

Right now, you are trusting that your pew is going to hold you up. When you sat down, there was no way you could be absolutely certain that it was going to hold you up. What if it was broken? What if it had been eaten by termites? Sitting on it was an act of faith.

The point I'm trying to make is that we put our faith in all kinds of things every day. We all have faith. And our actions are guided by our faith. The important question for us is whether the things we put our faith in are trustworthy or not. If we misplace our faith or put our faith and trust in something that is not trustworthy, then we could suffer greatly for it.

Well, how about when it comes to religion? Do we believe that God exists or not? That's the first question we have to answer. If we answer yes, "I believe that God exists," then God is the *object* of our faith. Faith always has an object. You don't just have faith. You always have faith in something. The object of our faith is God.

If we believe that God exists, then the next logical question we have to answer is this: Should we put our faith and trust in God? And to answer that, we need to ask: What is God like? Who is God? What are God's intentions for us and for the world? These answers make up what we might call the *content* of our faith.

Now, as Christians, as a community of faith, we believe that God is a God of love and mercy and forgiveness who wants to be in relationship with us and who desires that we live in healthy relationships with one another and with all of creation. We believe in the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ who came to bring us salvation, to set us free from the consequences of sin, and help us enter the kingdom of God's love. We believe that we can most clearly see God and understand God and know God and know God's will in and through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. This, in a nutshell, is what Christians believe; what we, as a community of faith, believe. Beyond this, we might not all believe the same thing, but when it comes to the basics of our faith, when it comes to the essentials, when it comes to the existence of God and the nature of God and God's intentions for us and the world, we, here at Peace, are all pretty much on the same page.

Now if someone wanted to know what it is that we believe as a church, if they wanted to know the *content* of our faith, we would probably point them to what is called “A Brief Statement of Faith.” This is the faith statement that was written by our denomination back in the 1980’s when our church was reunited after a long split between the northern and the southern church. We use a portion of this statement each Sunday for our affirmation of faith. After we dedicate ourselves and our gifts to God, we then say together what we believe.

But is signing on to a collection of doctrines or faith statements really what faith is about? Isn’t it more than simply acknowledging that a certain list of statements about God are true? Absolutely! Faith is more about trust than it is about correct thinking. It’s more about *who* than *what*. It’s more about what we mean when we say to somebody, “I believe in you.”

Notice the difference that the preposition makes. To *believe in* somebody is different from *believing* somebody. Believing somebody is believing that what they say is true—that their statements are true. But “I believe *in* you” means that not only does the person believe the other, but they also have *confidence in* them, they *trust* them. This the nature

of biblical faith. In the bible, faith doesn't focus on *what* we believe as much as *in whom* we place our trust.

And so, the two questions we need to ask ourselves today are: "Do we trust in God?" and "If so, does our life reflect that relationship of trust?" Do we rest on the promises of God? Does that trust affect our sense of identity? Does it affect the way we see the world, the way we live and move and have our being? Do we see the world differently because we trust that God is at work in it and God is calling us to join in that work?

In one of the videos we watched at youth group last month, the person was talking about faith and how our faith needs to move from being something that lives in our heads to something we embody as a whole. He talked about how the church needs to move from being like a lecture hall to more like a karate studio, a Jesus dojo, a space where we could work out the teachings of Jesus together in real life. Dojo is a Japanese word that means Place of the Way. It's an active learning space where skills are taught by a master teacher through example and group practice. He says you can't learn karate just by watching it, and we won't learn how to practice the way of Jesus without taking tangible steps to walk in his way." I like this metaphor for the church as community of faith that

gathers together to practice the faith, to learn new skills and live them out in community. In a dojo, no one sits on the sidelines, everyone participates.

Who are we called to be? We are called to be a community of faith that entrusts itself to God alone. We are called to put our faith in God. We are called to put our faith into practice and live it out. In faith, we trust in God's benevolence towards us. And because of this, we need not be anxious or worried. We need not fear. For we are saved by grace through faith.

The beautiful promise of the gospel is that God, in God's wisdom and mercy, holds us in a love that will never deteriorate, diminish or die—and since we do nothing to earn this love, all we can do is trust it. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.