

Faith
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West Lebanon Congregational Church
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Hebrews 10:30-11
I Corinthians 13:13

Since I will have the honor of being your preacher once a month for the next three months, before your official interim pastor takes over, I thought I would preach a series of sermons, and the words of our text, 1 Corinthians 13:13 – familiar I am sure to you all – came to me: “ And now abideth faith hope and love, these three – but the greatest of these is love.” And so I have planned to speak today about faith; in March about hope, and in April about love.

You will be happy to know that today’s sermon will be short. It is abbreviated because the focus of our worship today will be the Lord’s Supper. For reasons of brevity, I did not read to you one of the Bible’s central discussions of faith – the whole of Hebrews chapter 11; indeed, I simply pointed you to it, in the hope that during the coming week you may have a chance to read it more carefully on your own. So, what can I say about faith – briefly?

Faith is the foundation of life – not just of religious and spiritual life, but all human life. I would define faith as believing that something is trustworthy. In a purely biological sense, we absorb faith with our mother’s milk, as we learn to rely upon our parents for the care that we cannot provide for ourselves. The same is true in a religious sense: faith is the conviction that that our God is trustworthy. As Hebrews 11:1 tells us “Faith is the assurance (evidence) of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Certainly, as we know, faith and hope and love are inter-related, but they are different; and I suggest that faith is basic; faith comes first. Faith is the foundation for hope and love.

I would like to use several metaphors – inadequate ones, but perhaps helpful nonetheless: Faith is the belief that something is trustworthy. Think about taking a trip: Suppose you have long wanted to go visit a relative in

California, or perhaps go to explore places you've always heard of in Europe or explore the wildlife of Kenya. So, you're going to fly. Faith is getting on the airplane. It is the conviction that the airplane is trustworthy. (some of you may not have that conviction, but most of us do). We buy a ticket from Delta or American airlines, and we go get on the plane, having faith that it will take us to our destination.

Another metaphor: Suppose you decide to cook a meal, as I am sure many of you do every day. What is the first step? Assembling the ingredients. We start to cook using ingredients that we believe will be healthy and tasty. We cannot prepare a meal without beginning in faith.

A third metaphor: planting a garden. Planting a garden begins with faith in soil and seed. While the fruition of the garden, the growth of plants, of vegetables or flowers, depends on many additional factors – sunlight, rain, fertilizer – the garden begins with the fundamental faith – the belief that the soil and the seed are trustworthy. Faith is foundational.

But what about our religious faith – faith in God?

I am suggesting that faith in God is similar. Something has to start us off. For many of us, it is what we were taught in Sunday School, if we were fortunate enough to have been brought to Sunday School. Or from our parents. We are told that God is in charge of life, that we can trust God. And every night we said our prayers: Or at least some of us did: Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." I said that prayer from the time I could talk, and I expect some of you did too. From it, from my parents, from Sunday School, I was taught, learned, and accepted that prayer. It is where faith, for me, started.

Now I know that the prayer has been criticized, and some parents reject it, because it mentions death. Who wants children to fear that they may die in their sleep? Some might say that it is a strange basis for faith. It does not assure us that we will always be healthy that we will always be wealthy or popular or successful in all we do. It assures us that we will always belong to God. I may be inaccurate, but from the distance of so many years, I do not

remember that saying that prayer ever made me afraid. Rather, it gave me confidence. God would always be with me – or rather, I would always be with God. And that feeling, that belief, that assertion is the basis of our faith.

But our faith sometimes fails us, it seems. Airplanes crash – not often, but sometimes. Meals carefully prepared can turn out disappointingly, and sometime, if the ingredients are bad, or if we are allergic to them, can be poisonous. Not often, but sometimes.

And gardens sometimes fail – for lack of moisture or sunshine, or because the soil was bad, or the seeds were bad. Not often, but sometimes.

We live in a world where events do challenge our faith. And nothing challenges it more than the fact of death – especially the death of children. Christian faith is different from the kinds of faith I have mentioned because it proclaims that God is trustworthy, even when we face death. That is the message of Christian faith, the word made flesh in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ – which seems impossible to believe, but which we, assembled here today to celebrate the Lord's supper, do in fact believe. Oh, our faith may waiver. That is why we come to worship. That is why we have this sacrament, to remember Jesus's death – and resurrection.

I know that, in a congregation like this, even though I do not know many of you individually, I am sure some of you have experienced the death of children. Nothing is more painful.

You know, in some Christian traditions, especially Protestant ones, especially Calvinistic ones, young children were taught a catechism, which they memorized before being confirmed. Such training is mostly out of fashion now, in most denominations. But the catechisms still are there as resources, even if rarely used. I especially treasure the very first question 2nd answer of the ancient Heidelberg Catechism: (1537)

Question 1:

What is your only comfort

in life and death?

Answer:

That I am not my own, 1
but belong with body and soul,
both in life and in death, 2
to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. 3
He has fully paid for all my sins
with his precious blood, 4
and has set me free
from all the power of the devil. 5
He also preserves me in such a way 6
that without the will of my heavenly Father
not a hair can fall from my head; 7
indeed, all things must work together
for my salvation. 8
Therefore, by his Holy Spirit
he also assures me
of eternal life 9
and makes me heartily willing and ready
from now on to live for him. 10

Now, learning that as a child is the basis for faith – a faith that does not mean that life will always be easy for us, or that we will never know grief: – but it assures us that nothing can separate us from God’s love for us. Remember what Paul said in Romans:

Romans 8:38-39 King James Version (KJV)

38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the faith that we rest upon. That is what allows us to get on the plane – without fearing that it will crash. We know that life can be perilous. Things can happen that are overwhelmingly sad. But no matter what, we belong to God. That is our faith. It is what we live by. It is what we teach our children. And it is what we remember each time we celebrate the Lord's supper. We do not remember a feast in which Jesus was hailed as man of the year in Jerusalem; we remember that on the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread and gave it to his disciples. Giving them, and us, always, the means to remember his death, and ours, until we feast with him in glory – a glory that we do not understand or fully know. But we feast with him, in faith. Amen.