

Faith is . . . (Part Two)

Numbers 5:6 NRS Speak to the Israelites: When a man or a woman wrongs another, breaking faith with the LORD, that person incurs guilt.

Matthew 23:23 NRS "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

^{NRS} **Hebrews 11:1** Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

^{NRS} **2 Corinthians 13:5** Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test!

Faith is . . . (Part Two)

Today we continue exploring the full and rich dimensions of faith. Last week we looked at faith as a matter of believing, believing as declaring that something is true, and truth as that which is factual. With these modern and rather narrow definitions for these words, one could logically go from we are saved by faith, to we are saved by belief. All of this is about what we think. All of this is about faith as something in our head. But faith is also about what is in our heart. One aspect of faith that is in our heart is trust. As an example of that we looked at the passage where Jesus tells us that when we don't trust, when we are anxious about things, then we have little faith, little trust.

A second heart dimension of faith is fidelity. We're more likely to use the term faithfulness. The opposite of faithfulness and fidelity is unfaithfulness and infidelity. Faith as fidelity is about loyalty, allegiance, being committed at our deepest level, our heart being totally committed. Often, scripture speaks of lack of faith as adultery. Over and over, the prophets preach that Israel has been unfaithful to her God. They have neglected their relationship with God and have worshipped other gods – and the prophets don't mince words. They speak of this in terms of unfaithfulness, infidelity, and adultery. Listen to how Jeremiah describes the southern nation of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel. Judah saw how the northern kingdom of Israel had been faithless, committing adulteries, and God "had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her false sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore.⁹ Because she took her whoredom so lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree." (Jeremiah 3:8-9 NRS) The stone and tree references are regarding worship of other gods on pagan altars and pagan sacred poles.

Jesus uses the same blunt terminology. In Matthew 12, "Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to [Jesus] 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.'³⁹ But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it. (Matthew 12:38-39 NRS) This isn't about sexual relationships. Neither the prophet Jeremiah nor Jesus is accusing anybody of extramarital hanky-panky. No, it's about being unfaithful to God and to God's covenant. Another word that is used is idolatry. It isn't just about carved images. More than that, it's about giving our ultimate loyalty to something other than God. Faith means being loyal to God. Christian faith is loyalty to Jesus as Lord, greater loyalty than we give to affluence, achievement, our country, our desires, or our fascinations. Faith as fidelity is the full meaning of the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me."

Just like a faithful spouse pays attention to the relationship, so it is that faith requires us to be attentive to our relationship with God through worship, prayer, and a life of compassion and justice. Fidelity demands that we be engaged in worship, that we continue to study God's word, that we discern God's will over and over. Faith means loving that which God loves – our neighbors and all of creation.

So far, we've considered three dimensions of faith: belief, trust, and fidelity. The fourth aspect of faith is vision. By vision, I mean our overall outlook on life, the way we view life, our perspective on the world. There are three general ways to view life. One, we can view reality as hostile and threatening. Taken to extremes, this becomes paranoia. Life is filled with accidents, violence, poverty, unemployment, and disease. Life can look pretty threatening. If this is our vision of life then we respond by being defensive. In many popular forms of Christianity, reality is viewed as threatening. God is going to punish us unless we offer the right sacrifices, behave the right way, or believe the right things. For many, the troubles of life are a sign of God's judgment. Unless we get it right, God's going to get us! Our only hope is to get it right so that God won't punish us. This view leaves little, if any, room for grace.

A second view of life is that life is indifferent to humans and human concerns. The universe is nothing but force fields and matter, and it is neither hostile nor supportive of our hopes and our lives. We seek whatever security we can through striving for financial security, by trying to avoid risks even if they are minimal, and try for physical security through robust construction and sophisticated alarm systems. We focus our attention on ourselves and a small circle of friends and relatives. In both the first and the second vision of life, we tend to see little more than our own safety, our own needs, and our own wants. Our vision doesn't extend very far beyond ourselves.

The third view of life is the vision of reality that is a dimension of faith, one that is life-giving and nourishing. Life supports life. Reality is gracious. God clothes the lilies of the field and feeds the birds of the air. God sends the rain upon both the just and the unjust as an expression of generosity. Faith's vision of life approaches life with open arms - rather than open wariness. The vision of faith has open hands - rather than hands that grasp and clutch. This vision of life leads to radical trust. We're liberated from anxiety, self-centeredness, and concern for security systems. We're able to be self-forgetful and willing to spend ourselves and be spent for the sake of others and for the sake of our relationship with God. This vision leads to the kind of life that we see in Jesus. Not only do we need to have faith in Jesus, our hope is that we can move toward having the faith of Jesus. This vision of life as gracious goes hand in hand with faith as trust. How we see God - our faith vision - and our faith as trust in God, are interrelated.

Faith as belief is about what we think, it's a head faith, one might say. Faith as trust, fidelity, and vision is about feelings, a faith of the heart, so to speak. The scripture readings are the same this week as they were last week. Notice that none of them use the word *faith* in the sense of agreement with a factual statement. We saw how in the Old Testament, in the book of Numbers, it's written, "When a man or a woman wrongs another, breaking faith with the LORD, that person incurs guilt." The phrase here is "breaking faith," being unfaithful. The issue isn't about belief in the ways that we use the word belief. The issue is fidelity. When we wrong one another, we are damaging our relationship with God.

In the passage from Matthew, Jesus says that the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees have been meticulous in tithing, even to the point of giving ten percent of the herbs grown in their kitchen garden. But they've neglected the weightier matters of the law, the issues of justice, mercy, and faith. Faith in this passage isn't about believing the right things. It's about their faith vision. They've seen their religious life as one of following rules rather than a life of basking in God's love, loving God with all their heart, and sharing God's justice and mercy with others. Their vision of life has been centered on themselves and on following rules instead of a faith vision that celebrates love and turns outward to love others.

When we know that faith has dimensions of trust, fidelity, and vision, we can read the scriptures with deeper understanding. The woman who had been bleeding for twelve years reached out

and touched the hem of Jesus' cloak and she was healed. It wasn't a matter of "I **believe** that he **can** heal me." It was **trust** that Jesus' not only could, but **would** heal her.

When Jesus went on vacation up in the region of Tyre and Sidon, he was pestered by a gentile woman who wanted him to heal her daughter. Jesus told her that he was focused on his own people, the Jews. But the woman argued her case, saying that even a dog gets to eat the crumbs that fall from the table. And Jesus responded by praising her for her **great** faith. She had a great faith vision. She saw life as lived under a God who loved all creation, who cared for all people, who blessed everyone with both rain and sunshine. Her vision was one of love and compassion and she declared it boldly.

In the book of Acts, we learn about the early days of the followers of Jesus and we read in the sixth chapter, "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7 NRS) The interesting phrase here is "obedient to the faith." That is to say, the priests had not only believed the story of Jesus, but their faith had the added dimension of obedience, of fidelity. They not only believed the facts, but they were faithful in the way they lived, they lived in fidelity.

When you read scripture and you read of faith, hear the word in all of its breadth and depth. Substitute the word belief, the word trust, the word fidelity, and the word vision, so that the scripture can bloom in all of its glorious beauty and power. Amen

²¹ for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well."²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. (Mat 9:21-22 NRS)

²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Mat 15:25-28 NRS)