

### *Faith is . . . (Part One)*

**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 cumin, 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.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Hebrews 11:1** Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

<sup>NRS</sup> **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 One)*

What is faith? What do you mean when you use the word *faith*? Belief? Another word for religion? When you talk to someone of a different denomination, are you likely to ask, "What does your church believe?"

Most of the time when we use the word faith, we're talking about what we believe. Our worship service includes a "Statement of Faith." In that statement we declare that we believe that certain things are true. This is what we believe, we say. When we talk about faith, the underlying context is almost always that faith is about what we believe. All of this makes the concept of faith a matter of what you think ... a matter of the beliefs in your head. And that's a shame!

Up until about 500 years ago, the word faith meant much, much more. But, during the 1500s, the Reformation swept over Europe and the word faith came to be very much about what you believed. Did you believe the right things? Did you believe that the Pope was Christ's representative on earth – or not? Did you believe that the priest had been delegated the power to forgive your sins? Did you believe that the Bible should be printed in the language of the people – or only available in Latin? Did you believe that babies were born sinful and guilty until baptized – or did you believe that one should make a conscious decision to be baptized? Were all of your sins forgiven at the moment of baptism – or did baptism do something else? At the communion table, was the bread and wine turned into the flesh and blood of Jesus – or was it symbolic? Were there seven sacraments – or two – or none? And all of this was so important that it could easily cost you your life. People who believed the "wrong" things were beheaded, burned at the stake, and thrown into the river with stones tied to their feet. War raged across Europe off and on for much of the century, including one continuous stretch of thirty years.

The same thing goes on today, though usually less violently. There are one hundred churches in Thomasville, give or take a few. The number changes every week as congregations are started and closed down. Most of the churches in Thomasville are tiny. With 27,000 people and about 100 churches, that's the only condition one could expect. And congregations split and form new churches all of the time, replacing others that have closed their doors. Just as it was during the Reformation, the splits are often over belief. Do you believe in pre-millennialism – or not? Can you use yeast bread for the Lord's Supper – or, must it be unleavened bread? Is it okay to use the New International Version of the Bible – or is the King James Version the only acceptable Bible? How often should you have the Lord's Supper? Who can take communion? We still fight – and divide – over questions of faith, issues of belief.

During the Reformation, one of the big issues was how did one get to heaven? Could you buy your way out of purgatory and into heaven? Indulgences were sold with the promise that "Every time a coin in the box rings, a soul into heaven springs." And you thought marketing was a modern phenomenon! Did you earn forgiveness by doing works of penance? Did you earn religious "atta-

boys" by going on a pilgrimage to various holy places? The Reformers would quote Paul and emphasize "justification by grace through faith" which was shortened to "justification by faith." This left out grace and only left us to have faith. We often expressed the same idea as "We are saved by faith, not works." And if faith means belief, then we are saved by believing.

Today we will begin to explore the fuller, richer meaning of faith, the meaning and connotations of the word before we reduced it to a shell of its former self. To understand scripture, we need to know what the ancient writers meant when they said "faith." During the time in history known as the Reformation, there were large shifts in the meaning of some important words. For over fifteen centuries, the word *orthodox* meant correct worship. You were orthodox if you worshipped correctly. But during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as we discussed earlier, the church was split in several ways over questions of belief and orthodox began to mean "right belief" or "correct belief." And faith came to mean "believing the right things." So let's begin by considering faith as a matter of belief.

**Belief** – When we agree with a statement, we say "I believe that." The Apostles' Creed, an ancient creed written around the year 500 AD begins, "I believe . . ." We are giving our assent to a statement, a proposition. We are saying that it is true. But, then, during the 1700s and 1800s, science began to help us understand the world around us. We started to understand disease, began to increase crop production, and harnessed energy to make our lives easier. Without realizing it, we gradually changed the concept of truth. Truth came to mean facts. Truth was something that you could prove by scientific testing. When we only think of truth as meaning facts, we can get into trouble. Because then we think if something isn't factual, then it isn't true. Truth lost its wider meaning as wisdom.

Let me give a simple and silly example. All of us probably know the story of the Three Little Pigs. When you tell the story of the three little pigs to a small child, they're likely to ask you, "Is that a true story?" Either you or the child is likely to point out that pigs can't talk, pigs can't build houses, and a wolf can't blow a house down with his breath. And so, you and the child agree that it's not a true story. But the reason why the story of the *Three Little Pigs* has endured – and the reason why wise parents might tell it to their children is because the story conveys important truths. Think ahead about situations that may arise. Build your house and build your life to withstand stresses and strains that may come. Durability is an important aspect of quality. Help your neighbors when they're in trouble.

When we limit our understanding of truth to just facts, when faith only means belief, and when believing is only about saying something is factual, we can paint ourselves into uncomfortable corners and drive others away from becoming followers of Jesus. When I was growing up, I was taught that since the Bible was the word of God, every word in the Bible was true. "Do I have to believe that Adam lived for nine hundred and thirty years?" "Yes, that's what it says in the Bible, so it is true." "But that confuses me because Psalm 90 says we are given threescore and ten years. Seventy years makes sense, but 930 years doesn't make sense to me." "Well, you can't doubt the scriptures. Doubting is a sin. You have to believe it!"

When people are told that they can't have any doubts, that they can't question, that their belief must be total, then some people are driven away from ever following Christ because they feel like they can't accept every detail in scripture as factual. Others, are like me, doing my best to accept it all as fact, afraid of asking questions, afraid that if I found anything that I couldn't believe was true, then the whole fabric of my faith would unravel and I would fall through, straight to hell. I just avoided passages of scripture like Psalm 114:4 which reads, "The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs."

We hear that we are saved by faith. When faith is all about believing, then we feel that believing the right things saves us. But we can believe all of the right things and still be relatively unchanged. Just believing has very little power to transform our lives. The apostle Paul challenged

us to be changed, to be transformed. In Romans 12:2, he wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect." Often, just agreeing to various statements has little more effect on us than just getting us to nod our head. It may not transform our life very much at all.

But faith isn't just a matter of what we think. It isn't just a head thing. Faith is also a matter of the **heart**, even though we may not have seen it that way very often. Faith isn't just believing – it's also trust. If you've ever taught a child to swim, you know that the biggest hurdle is getting the child to relax in the water. If they fight the water, tense up, and thrash about, eventually they'll sink. But you keep telling them, "Relax, trust me." Faith is trusting in the buoyancy of God. Faith is trusting in God as the one upon whom we rely, our support and foundation, our safe place is the sea of God's love.

Please take out a pew Bible and open it to Matthew 6:25. One of the most beautiful passages in the Sermon on the Mount is about faith as trust – and about how the opposite of trust isn't unbelief, but anxiety or worry. Jesus said, <sup>25</sup> "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?<sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?<sup>27</sup> Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?<sup>28</sup> "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin.<sup>29</sup> Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.<sup>30</sup> If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of **little faith**?<sup>31</sup> So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' (Mat 6:25-31 NIV) Four times Jesus said, do not worry – about what you will eat or drink, about your life, or what you will wear. Don't be anxious – you of little faith.

Faith as trust is not easy for many of us. So our anxiety builds and we pull back from it, sometimes comforting ourselves that at least we believe the right things. However, when we trust, we're freed from the chains of worry and anxiety. We're liberated to risk ourselves for Christ. We're set free to live life with more imagination, more love, more abundantly.

There are more dimensions to faith than believing and trusting, and next week we'll explore faith further. Amen.