

“Have you ever had a crisis of faith?” read her one line e-mail. “Yes,” I replied. “You?”

This old friend of mine and I emailed back and forth over several months about her question. I can’t claim that I’ve offered any insight that helped her particularly nor has she resolved it all. However, it puts me in mind of a question that perhaps you would share with me, what is faith?

What is faith? How do I know if I have it? What do I do if it fails me? Perhaps I’m attaching overmuch meaning to these questions, but if indeed our salvation comes by grace through faith, these are deeply important questions. And I have preached often about faith and doubt because I believe they are two sides of the same coin, cousins at least, if not friends, but today I want to explore a different dimension of faith with you. I want to consider faith from a different vantage point. While we will briefly touch on the crises of faith, I want to consider faith from the standpoint of living with it.

Now to have the freedom to do this, I want to take the salvation question off the table.

Yes, I know that our lesson this morning mentions that salvation is by grace through faith. I know that salvation is an important question. But I want to offer the observation that salvation refers to how we live now, not just how we live after we die. So let’s take the salvation question off the table. Here’s how I propose to do this: I want you to trust today that your eternal life is assured. I know that skirts up against universalism and I know there are folks that have trouble with that. We can talk about that another time – I’m happy to talk about it. But today, I want you to work from the assumption that God who loves you loves you too much to leave whether you live or die after your earthly life ends up to whether or not you had adequate faith. Grace, after all, is the beginning of that

sentence, and Grace is the free, unmerited, unconditional love of God. Making faith a work is dangerous territory and I want us to take that off the table. Your life after death rests in the loving hands of God who will not let you fall, because the Bible says it is the gift of God.

With that assurance, I want us to talk about faith.

Let's consider faith four ways: Faith is what binds us together as a body. Faith is what carries us through. Faith is what we share with each other. And finally I want to conclude with the assurance that faith is what brings us into the kingdom.

Let's start with faith as what binds us together as a body. This is perhaps the trickiest because in a sense, this perhaps involves us most directly. This is the expression of faith as the corporate experience of the church. We're different. We've declared ourselves to be different from the world around us. We've said we're going to be a part of this particular body that makes these particular claims about who God is and how God has promised to be toward us. We make these claims and we declare that we're going to live a peculiar life that is sometimes against the grain but is decidedly reliant on God's mercy. Sometimes I wonder whether or not our faith claims have become so glibly a part of the cultural vernacular that we don't recognize that they are particular and peculiar. Faith has become a part of our political rhetoric. Indeed in the last presidential primary, I watched with interest as the candidates Clinton, McCain and Obama talked very opening about their beliefs at the Saddleback Church. I watched the Republican debate the other night and there was quite a bit of talk about faith. That's not to say that it's bad, but it is decidedly mainstream. And when something is mainstream, it is not necessarily particular or peculiar. But the gospel is both particular and peculiar. So I want us to be

careful to note that when the claims of faith no longer call us to declare a message that is scandalous in its particularity, perhaps we need to be suspect. What do I mean by this? Well, here's an example: years ago, I heard Nora Tisdale preach on the matter of slave spirituals. Nora remembered the spirituals of her own camp years as a teenager, of singing, 'Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus'. And then she spoke of how her understanding of the meaning of these songs was turned inside out by Dr. Peter Paris when he wrote of these songs as faith stories of the *particular* community that wrote them. Imagine, she said, the difference of singing 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot', when the singer is in fact expressing a prayer that God would swing low from on high and rescue the singer/prayer from the bondage of slavery. "Guide my Feet while I run this race" means something particularly different if it is a prayer to be guided to freedom. Indeed, we remember the power of the songs of faith in their particular witness when we remember the civil rights struggle.

Faith is our corporate identity. Faith is the common life of the people lived with the recognition that the declaration of faith gives voice to the hopes, fears and dreams of the people in light of the gospel promise. That gospel promise is salvation, not just in the sweet by and by, but now.

This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of faith, to understand that is the articulation of the hopes of God's people when it may challenge our own way of life. I imagine that the slave owners and the slaves both hoped in the resurrection, but one of those groups sought transformation of the existing order. That's a challenge. Indeed it is always something of a challenge for any church to consider where the calling of faith *must*

overturn previously held beliefs. But it is salvific to think of faith in the sense that it can change us.

Faith is what brings us together. Faith is what makes us a community. It is our common faith, our common seeking after the will of Jesus Christ that gives voice to what it is we believe it means to be church. Sometimes it's tough. But faith as the common element that makes us church is decidedly a declaration to be particular. We're not about just any work here, we're not just a group of nice people doing good work, rather, *we're about the transforming work of Jesus*. That's what brings us together.

Faith is what constitutes us as church, but faith is also what carries us through. Faith is what carries us through when we're not sure at all what should happen next, or what we should do. Let me share a personal story. The particulars are not important - what is important was the feeling. I don't anger easily, I have an extremely long fuse, but I found myself angry beyond words on this occasion. And it was an anger I couldn't let go of. I was vexed. I fretted. I stewed. I couldn't let go. Perhaps you know the feeling I'm talking about. I found myself worried, holding a grudge and not at all happy about what needed to be done to reconcile the relationship. Finally, I realized that in the short term I had to do something to distract myself from my own anger and so, having bought the paint to paint my kitchen only a day before, I decided, well hey, there's no time like the present. Now I don't like background noise. I don't listen to the radio when I work, I don't hop out of bed and turn on the TV. I do what I'm doing and that's it. So imagine my surprise when midway through painting the kitchen I realized that I had been humming. Actually, I had been singing and I didn't even realize it. And what I had been singing was an old arrangement of the 23rd Psalm that I first learned in my home church

and have treasured since. It was a transformational moment for the situation I faced. The faith that I had been raised in asserted itself, unbidden, and offered me another way to be. I was able to pause, to climb down off the counter I was standing on and be angry and be sad and hurt but to do it in the context of the 23rd Psalm. I could remember then what my faith said about the valley. I could remember what my faith said about forgiveness. It carried me. In other words, my faith reminded me of how I wanted to relate to this situation. My faith reminded me of how I wanted to be in this situation. It carried me. Now I don't tell this story to toot my own horn. I share it to lead to the idea that faith transforms how we relate to even difficult situations.

This brings me to the idea that faith shapes us. It shapes who we are. But first we must shape the faith that we live in. In this sense, I am speaking of practices of faith. Essentially what I'm suggesting is this: we have a choice about what sort of experiences, language and practices and attitudes we would bring to bear on the situations that challenge us. The choice we make is to surround ourselves with those experiences, practices and language that offer us a way to live the way that Jesus taught us. It's stacking the deck, in a sense. But when we are challenged for whatever reason, those experiences, language and practices will be part of who we are. This is what my faith community did for me. This is what we are doing for each other. We won't have to look up the twenty-third psalm to ground ourselves in forgiveness and reconciliation, we'll just find ourselves singing it. This in a sense does offer a starting place for thinking about those moments when our faith is challenged – the moments of crisis, I spoke of at the start. I would never want to suggest that practices provide a foolproof failsafe against crises of faith. They don't. Faith is a living thing, and it faces challenges. But learning to

practice our faith does give us language to speak of what it is that matters to us. And that's important. Having the words to speak to ourselves carries us.

Faith is what binds us together, faith is what carries us and faith is what we share with one another. Faith offers us the ability to relate to each other in a uniquely different way.

I have two stories I want to tell you that will offer a sense of this. This first story I'm a little reticent to tell because in a certain sense, it is a holy story. About five years ago, I was in Scotland on a pulpit exchange and I found myself one Sunday invited by a member of the Kildrum parish church for a day adventure. I confess that the burr was a bit strong at times, and this particular invitation took place during the shaking of hands after the service. Iain came up to me and said, "How would you like to see a real Scottish country church?" (I was in suburban Glasgow.)

"That would be marvelous," I replied. "Why don't you phone me at the manse and we'll figure out when it will work."

When I say the burr was a bit strong, it's because what I thought I heard right after it as he walked away was, this: "I'll phone you up and we'll find a time and we'll scatter some of my wife's ashes."

I am as comfortable as any minister can reasonably be at the graveside, but that was a bit of a breezy invitation to scatter ashes, and the scattering of ashes was not in the brochure when Elinor and I talked about exchanging pastorates. You do that with your pastor, not with the visiting preacher. I waited for his call. Sure enough, he wanted to go to his old family home in Lochgoilhead and scatter there his wife's ashes. I didn't know what to do. I had company coming. He offered to drive and to include my guest.

So I took the easy way out. I spoke to my friend who had just arrived after many hours in transit involving planes, trains and automobiles and I said, “Well, I’ve got great news. We’re going to Lochgoilhead. We’re going to ride with a member of the congregation and by the way, we’re going to scatter his wife’s ashes.”

My friend looked me dead in the eye and said, “That sounds like a ministerial sort of thing to do. Shouldn’t I stay at the manse?”

I called Iain and asked whether he really wanted my friend to come along and here’s what he said, ‘Don’t worry about the ashes. You see, my wife died a year ago and I’m scattering her ashes in the places we loved. It’ll just be a moment, and I’d love the company.’

And so we did. We rode with Iain meandering through the shores of the Clyde to Rest and Be Thankful, then we descended back down to the headwaters of Loch Goile. And there we found the Scottish country church and I ruminated on the centuries of believers who came before us and Iain scattered some of his wife’s ashes. I am convinced that that it was a shared hope of the resurrection that brought the three of us to that cemetery. Faith made the moment holy.

Now my friend DC’s story, and it’s holy too. At a Wednesday night supper, she was getting ready to sit with our guests from Room in the Inn, which was one of our outreaches to men and women experiencing homelessness, and as she set her plate down, she said to the gentleman next to her, “I could eat my weight in these potatoes.”

That opened the door to talk about other things. They talked about faith and Jesus and life and what they all had to do with each other, the whole group of them, folks at the fringes and one Presbyterian Minister. We had a meeting together starting at 7, and about

7:15, I thought, well, I ought to go make sure DC's not locked out or anything. She was rushing up the hall and scrambling to grab her devotion and her calendar and everything else she needed for the meeting.

As she came in she said, "This is why I'm late. I was sitting at the table with our guests and we'd broken the ice over the mashed potatoes, and I suddenly realized that it was time for the meeting. I knew I had to go, so I said to the guests, 'I'm having such a marvelous time. I don't want to go, but I've got a meeting'. One of our guests said to me, 'Miss DC, please don't go yet. You see, we're having church right now.' DC said, 'I sat back down and stayed with them and that's why I'm late.'"

Faith took an ordinary moment and made it holy. Faith is what allows us to relate to each other as God's loved children.

I offer these stories because faith while a mystery, is ultimately experiential. Faith is about living with an eye for the kingdom of God. Faith is about trusting that there is more grace, mercy and love in God than our tiny, conflicted minds can ever ask or imagine. It is a gift from God and we live it together. And faith saves us. Faith saves us from what we are told we ought to be about. Because faith, you see, offers us a glimpse of life in the kingdom. And in life in the kingdom, we will lay our worries and our fears aside and live as God's children. Faith offers us a glimpse of that kingdom as it is being worked out. Faith offers us another way.

Faith offers us another way, because, faith ultimately, is about trust.

Faith is about trust, and that's why I ask you to set aside the worries about salvation and think on faith, because we can rest in the trust that the God in whom we have our faith will always be faithful to us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.