

A Matter of Faith

Part 1: What is Faith?

*"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1*

Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16 Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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How would you complete this sentence: My definition of 'faith' is...

What is faith? As good Christians, aren't we supposed to know what faith is? We're going to explore this topic this morning and next Sunday, including some biblical and theological definitions. For the truth of the matter is that a majority of Christians would actually have to admit that they have a difficult time putting words to their understanding of faith. But many have tried. For instance, here's a wonderful quote from Presbyterian author Fredrick Buechner:

Faith is better understood as a verb, than a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again/off-again rather than once and for all. Faith is not being sure of where you're going, but going anyway. A journey without maps.

Faith, for most of us, is something more we experience than it is something we can describe. The Bible, too, uses the stories of peoples' lives to *illustrate* what faith is, like the life of Abraham and Sarah as we heard in both Scripture lessons this morning.

Chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews, however, begins with a classic definition, perhaps the most famous passage in this book, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (NRSV). The Contemporary English Version translates it this way, "Faith makes us sure of what we hope for and gives us proof of what we cannot see." I particularly like the translation in The Jerusalem Bible, "Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of the realities that at present remain unseen."

While we might debate what these statements actually mean, it seems clear that, according to the author of Hebrews, **faith and hope cannot be separated**. Think about this in relationship to the understanding of your faith. Doesn't your faith include the element of hope?

What else can we say about faith? The professional journal called *The Living Pulpit*, published an article in 2000 by **Douglas John Hall**, Professor of Christian Theology at McGill University in Montreal. It's entitled, "**Faith: Response in Relationship**," Hall begins with perhaps the best approach.

When it comes to defining something as elusive and misunderstood as faith, perhaps the way to begin is to say what it is *not*. **There are at least three fundamental misconceptions of faith at work in our society.** If we can identify them, it will leave a little space for pointing to the mystery that faith -- biblically understood -- is.

First, faith is not assent to doctrines about God, creation, Jesus Christ, etc. This does not mean that faith has nothing to do with 'beliefs' or cherished 'truths' of the tradition; it has. But faith isn't to be equated with giving credence to these teachings. Neither of the two most important historic creeds of the church (The Apostles and Nicene Creeds) begins, "I believe *that* God is the Father Almighty." They begin, "I believe *in* God."

Second, faith is not accepting 'on authority' what one cannot personally experience or feel to be true. (This includes the authority of the church, the tradition, the Bible, parents and teachers, preachers, etc.) There is a necessary personal dimension in faith; you have to 'do it yourself.'

Others can share their faith with you, but they can't give you faith. Most people realize this after they come to a point when they question what they have been told to believe as children and youth, or even as adults. After you hit that 'wall' you come through on the other side with a better understanding of what it is you believe. **It becomes your faith, not the faith of parents or the church.**

Third, faith is not a vague spirituality. In reaction against the sort of faith referred to in the first two misunderstandings, 'modern' forms of Christianity often foster the notion that faith is chiefly an emotion [like elements in the Pentecostal tradition, among others], or a positive outlook [like Robert Schuller, Joel Osteen, among others], or a readiness to 'believe.'

[This approach to faith means that] It doesn't much matter what you believe, or perhaps even what kind of behavior your belief leads to. The main thing is to be a believing person. However, the scriptures and the best expressions of the Judeo-Christian tradition do not equate faith with such 'believing-in-believing.'

So what can we say about faith? Perhaps most of us understand **faith as trust.** Hall states, "Like most of the primary concepts of biblical religion (love, hope, grace, compassion, forgiveness, repentance, justice), faith is a category of relationship. **It presupposes relationship with God.**"

Now I've personally come a long way in developing a somewhat radically progressive understanding of God. But for me, that understanding still involves believing in a God that we can be in relationship with. I fully realize that if that isn't *your* understanding of God, then perhaps all this talk about faith is meaningless, at least in the traditional sense. But think for a moment about faith as a matter of trust.

In the act of trusting someone, you go beyond what you know of him or her. Trust involves decision and risk. And the decision is not just once and for all; it has to be renewed regularly, if it is to be authentic.

Faith is response in relationship; it is an ongoing thing, a process. You can never say that you 'have' it as if it were a possession! ...We have to continue receiving it like the manna of the wilderness or the 'daily bread' of Jesus' prayer.

Let's turn now from an understanding of faith as trust, let's look at **faith and doubt**.

Whenever it is understood that faith is a trusting response towards God as God enters into a relationship with us, the whole matter of doubt is cast in a different light. Because faith has been identified with accepting as true an indefinite number of claims made by religious authorities, doubt has also been misconstrued to mean skepticism about all or some of these claims.

Many people labor under the impression that real faith means assenting to all those 'truths'--the Trinity, the incarnation, heaven and hell, the divinity of Jesus, the Resurrection; and nearly everyone has intellectual difficulty with a good deal of that. But **if faith is understood as a process of trust which develops in the context of an ongoing relationship with God, doubt makes a great deal of sense as an authentic aspect of the life of faith!**

Consider any deep relationship in which you find yourself--with your spouse, your lover, your close friends, your parents or your children. In such relationships there is mutuality. You trust and are trusted by the other. But this trust is continually put to the test. You can't be sure!

That's very fortunate; people who are absolutely sure of their partners, relatives or friends become presumptuous. They take the relationship for granted. But it is the element of risk that keeps the relationships alive. The decision to trust the other has to be made again and again--and for that reason the relationship does not grow cold.

Doubt, as the constant reminder of the risk in faith, plays a vital role in the life of faith. The Bible is wonderfully honest about the doubting of the faithful. [whether it be Job in the Old Testament, Thomas in the New Testament, or even Jesus on the cross.]

Faith in God is not an easy thing. Who could take it seriously if it were? Giving voice to our struggle, our doubt, belongs ultimately to the life of faith. It is unfortunate that most Christian worship makes so little room for honest wrestling with God, for this only serves to shut real doubt out of the sanctuary and therefore to cheapen the meaning of faith.

Moving on from faith as trust, and faith and doubt, let's now explore **faith and understanding**. One of the great theologians of the ancient church, St. Anselm, said that '**Faith seeks understanding**.' Hall writes, "What he meant is that if you believe in God you will be driven by your belief itself to understand what you believe. Faith is not blind. It cannot comprehend everything. But it wants to know." He rightly concludes that, "We have come to a time in the history of Christianity when this relation between faith and understanding has to be grasped in a new way. In the secularized, pluralistic society of today, **faith without understanding cannot endure**. In the post-Christendom period, every Christian must in some sense become a theologian and every congregation must provide opportunities for the study of the faith."

That is certainly the purpose of our Christian Education program, including the adult church school class last year dealing with Progressive Christianity.

Hall is emphatic when he states, "**There can be no more automatic Christianity**. Like the earliest Christians, Christians today and in the future will have to be able to 'give a reason for the hope that is in them.'"

With so many more things and can and should be said about faith, I'll close with following observation. **We are always being nudged to move on to new horizons, like Abraham and Sarah were**. There is a call from God to go forward into the unknown, both as individuals and as a congregation.

Being faithful to our call to inclusive ministry, for instance, has led us into the realm of multicultural ministry. We have recognized the risk this involves, and trust that we are heading in the direction God is leading. **We, no less than Abraham and Sarah, are often called to leave behind certain old ways and understandings**.

Abraham and Sarah never knew where the road of life would take them but they believed that God was present and active in their lives. Their story reveals to us that **faith is in the journey, not in the arrival at a particular destination**. Similarly, our faithfulness, then, is determined in the relationship revealed in our assurance of God's call to go where we discern God is leading us, not in the assurance of where we're going to end up.

Precisely because our destination is unknown, we have faith – the assurance that God is with us and for us as we travel along this fascinating journey – "a journey without maps".

Stay tuned for Part II next Sunday.
Amen.

Resource: Copyright © 2000 All Right Reserved - The Living Pulpit, Inc. Douglas John Hall is Professor of Christian Theology at McGill University, Montreal, Que., Canada. He is author of *Thinking The Faith*.