

## TWO TYPES OF FAITH

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills

March 8, 2020

Romans 4:1–5, 13–17, 20–25  
John 3:1–17

Lent is a season for taking stock of our lives, not least of the state of our spiritual health. It is fashionable in some circles these days to profess to being “spiritual but not religious,” but I trust those of us who make our way to church on Sunday morning have not completely written off religion as it has been practiced over hundreds of generations of Christians. Still, what does it mean to practice the Christian religion, the faith of our fathers and mothers? I’d like to suggest this morning that how we answer that question can depend a great deal on how we understand or define the word, *faith*.

Nearly seventy ago, the influential Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber wrote a book that was translated into English as *Two Types of Faith*.<sup>1</sup> In this book, Buber proposes that there are basically two types of faith: one that is based on trust and one that is based on belief. Do you see the distinction? You *trust someone*; but you *believe a thing* to be true. You trust someone because you have a relationship with him or her. Belief in something, on the other hand, is rooted in the acceptance of propositions as truth. Developing a relationship with Jesus and learning to trust his goodness and love, for example, is something distinct from coming to believe intellectually that Jesus is God or that he rose from the dead. Those are two different types or aspects of faith. They may inform one another, but they are not at all the same.

It’s easy for us to confuse the two, however, because the Bible uses the words for “faith”— *’emen* (אמן) in Hebrew and *pisteuō* [πιστεύω] in Greek—to render, depending on the context and the situation, both “trust” and “belief.”

In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible speaks of people *trusting* in God. This is something that we might call ‘faithfulness’ rather than simply ‘faith,’ implying that we are talking about a way of being, not just a set of beliefs or practices. But at the same time, both Testaments also speak of people *believing* certain principles about God or believing that God has or will do something that God has promised to do. You can imagine as well that in some places these two types of faith overlap and are less easy to distinguish. The shared vocabulary of faith and the difficulty of translating concepts from ancient to modern languages will sometimes leave us struggling to figure out what was meant and what it means for us today.

Our scripture lessons this morning provide good examples of the difficulty of understanding what various biblical writers mean by faith.

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003 [1951]), cited in John W. Vest, “Hear Me Now and Believe Me Later,” Sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, February 17, 2008.

In our gospel reading, Jesus' exchange with Nicodemus culminates in what is without a doubt the most famous and oft-quoted verse of the entire Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Central to this statement is the concept of belief. Belief in Jesus leads to salvation.

Now the Greek word translated as "believes" is derived from the basic root for "faith," so it could just as easily be translated as "trust." Does this sound different to you? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may not perish but may have eternal life." I think it does. Trusting in Jesus is not exactly the same as believing in Jesus, if believing in Jesus means that one has to accept all the things that the church happens to teach about Jesus. But trusting in the living Christ is something different altogether. It's not about reciting a creed or going through a checklist of doctrines. It's about being in a relationship.

So which did the gospel writer John mean? Belief or trust? Reading the entire Gospel of John leads me to think that it is belief. More so than the other Gospels, John seems especially concerned with belief and correct belief. This word for faith [πιστεύω] occurs eighty-five times in John, compared to just thirty-two times in the other three Gospels combined. In John, the work of God is defined as believing "in him whom [God] has sent."<sup>2</sup> Jesus repeatedly teaches that belief in him is the requirement for eternal life.<sup>3</sup> One's relationship to God is defined in terms of belief in Jesus.<sup>4</sup> The results of Jesus' teaching are often described as coming to belief.<sup>5</sup> The famous story of 'doubting' Thomas not believing in the resurrection until he sees Jesus, a story unique to the Gospel of John, is paradigmatic of how the reader is to respond to the gospel. Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."<sup>6</sup> And finally, John concludes by offering this reason for writing down the Gospel in the first place: "These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."<sup>7</sup>

What about this morning's first reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans? In this passage, Paul is making an argument that it is faith that "justifies" us before God; in other words, it is faith that brings us into a right relationship with God and reconciles us to God. To prove his point, Paul draws our attention to a paradigm of faith from the Old Testament, Abraham. Paul quotes the story of Abraham from the book of Genesis, which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Here again, the word translated as "believed" is the basic "faith" word in both the Hebrew original [אמן] and the Greek translation [πιστεύω] that Paul quotes. But this time, I think it might be more appropriate to translate it as "trust" instead of "believe."

---

<sup>2</sup> John 6:29.

<sup>3</sup> John 5:24; 6:40, 47; 11:26.

<sup>4</sup> John 12:44; 16:27; 17:21.

<sup>5</sup> John 8:30; 10:42.

<sup>6</sup> John 20:29.

<sup>7</sup> John 20:31.

In Genesis, Abraham is not asked to believe a particular doctrine about God. He is not tested on church dogma. He has just been told that even though he and his wife are very old—decades past the age of child-bearing—they will be given a son. Even more, God has promised Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in heaven. In response to this, it is said that Abraham “believed” God. But we’re really talking about trust here: Abraham was faithful and trusted that God would be faithful too. “Abraham trusted God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

In these two stories, the story of Jesus and Nicodemus and the story of God and Abraham, I think we can find the two types of faith suggested by Buber. I think we can see the difficulty of translating these ancient texts.

But why does it matter? Why does it matter which of these understandings of faith we find in a particular story? Why does it matter which type of faith we most identify with in our own life?

It matters, I think, because the second type of faith, the belief type of faith, is often a stumbling block for many of us earnestly seeking to follow God through the way of Jesus. Some people wonder if they believe enough. When Christianity is reduced to a set of doctrines or a collection of beliefs, it not only loses some of its life and vitality, it can easily become a litmus test for who is in and who is out. “Believe this and you can be a part of our community; if not, you don’t belong here.”

I, for one, believe that approach is at odds with the gospel Jesus lived and taught. I think that Jesus was less concerned with what people believed and more concerned with how well they trusted God and sought to follow where God leads.

There is another passage from the Old Testament in the suggested lectionary readings for this day, although we did not read it. It’s from the book of Genesis and it concerns Abraham, but it’s not that part of Abraham’s story that was quoted by Paul. Instead, it comes from the beginning of Abraham’s story—God’s call to Abraham to leave his home and follow God to a new land. This is a story of trust.

I have used this story at the beginning of the confirmation classes I lead, when I invite young people to join the adults in the congregation on the journey of faith. I point out to them that the story of our faith doesn’t begin with a set of rules or a set of doctrines to believe in. The story of our faith begins with an invitation to walk. It begins with an invitation to trust God in the midst of life and to worry about the believing later. And I show them that this is just what Abraham does.

As we make our way through this season of Lent, I hope you will never lose sight of the faithfulness of God. Jesus wanted us to know that we can trust God because God is ever gracious and loving. Grace and love are those amazing things you can never get or earn but only be given. As Frederick Buechner once put it, “There’s no way to earn [grace] or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.” Similarly, the experience of God cannot be achieved by rightness, effort, ability or belief. There’s nothing we can do to catapult ourselves across the chasm between heaven and earth on the momentum of our own achievement, our own knowledge, or our own goodness. Like the wind, God doesn’t do our bidding, or come when called, or leave when banished.

But the good news is: God *chooses* to come to us. “*For God so loved that world that God gave God’s only son.*” To have faith in Jesus is to trust that God loved the world so much that God gave the Son as a gift—that the One whom Jesus called Father loves with a love that knows no bounds. Can you let yourself be loved that way? When you do, Jesus says, you receive eternal life, because your life—right here and right now—is reshaped and redefined by the most powerful force in the universe: the same love that *made* the universe to begin with, the very Spirit of the living God. We’ve nothing to give; we can only receive. Life abundant and eternal is a gift, from above.

That was hard for Nicodemus to hear, to understand. And we all start out like Nicodemus—hungry for the word of God that will begin to form us in the faith—whether all in an instant or over an entire lifetime—and so change us that we can, indeed, speak of being “born again.” How does that happen? Well God is free to work in myriad and mysterious ways, and I do not presume to know them all. But I am persuaded that God uses us—all of us who like Nicodemus have come stumbling in the dark to this place where Christ is known—to communicate God’s love and God’s grace in what we say and in all we do. Our very existence as the church, particularly as we reach out to the world outside our doors, creates the possibility for the men and women and children whom God loves to encounter the word of God, and, by God’s amazing grace, to come to believe.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we bend our knees and lift up our hearts, giving glory to God forever. Amen.