

Trust-Walk

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Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 24, 2023

Scripture

Ephesians 1:15-23

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

Sermon

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus” (Ephesians 1:15). Paul commends the church in Ephesus for their devotion to Christ, for their “love toward the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers” (Ephesians 1:16). He commends them for their faith in Christ, and then he prays for them. For what does he pray? That God—the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory—may give the church wisdom and revelation as it grows to know Christ better so that with the eyes of their hearts enlightened, they may know what is the hope to which God has called them, what is the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints” (Eph. 1:17-18)—that is, among the holy ones, the saints, God’s people in the church.

Paul has heard about their faith and then prays they will have an even deeper faith, a deeper experience of God, a more profound awareness of what God continues to offer God’s people through Christ. For Paul understands faith to be a living “thing.” It’s alive, dynamic, and never static. Moving. Growing. Unfolding.

For Paul and the New Testament in general, faith is rarely about *believing* in, well, *beliefs*, that is, a set of doctrines. The content of Paul’s faith in the Lord certainly contained specific claims about the identity and mission of Jesus, particular claims or beliefs about him. But the claims, that is, the content of his faith were all rooted in his encounter *with*, his experience *of* the risen

Christ, his own ongoing relationship with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through his relationship with Christ, Paul came to know something about who God *is* and God's purpose for his life. Paul didn't just come up with these ideas or beliefs about Jesus on his own; they weren't the result of deductive reasoning or philosophical contemplation. And Paul wasn't trying to form a new philosophy or even a new religion, as some have argued. What he claimed to be truth, the content of his faith, flowed from his ongoing encounter with the living God, with the God—the nature of God—revealed to him in Christ. This is important because we sometimes forget that theological doctrines flow from experience, which comes first. Theological doctrines, ideas, and beliefs are second-order knowledge; they result from reflection on what we experience, which is first-order.

In her book *Almost Christian*, which came out about a dozen years ago, Kenda Dean, professor at Princeton Seminary, reminded us that until very recently, roughly the last two hundred years, we held a different understanding of faith. We tend to view faith and belief as synonyms; we use these words interchangeably. We think that if we hold certain beliefs *about* Christ, then we have faith. However, when Jesus asked his disciples to believe in him, he was asking for something more than belief; he was asking, "Will you have faith in me? Will you trust me?" Kenda Dean reminds us, "Christianity has always been more of a trust-walk than a belief system. In the Christian tradition," she writes, "faith depends on who we follow, and that depends on who we love. Believing in a person —having utter confidence in someone—creates a very different set of expectations than believing in 'beliefs.' For Christians, faith means cleaving to the person, the God-man, of Jesus Christ, joining a pilgrim journey with other lovers and following him into the world." [1]

Somewhere along the way, however, faith became obsessed with belief and abstract ideas about God, and then religion became the reliquary of dead, lifeless beliefs. No wonder people are running from anything that smacks of so-called "organized religion"—although I'm not sure I would want to be part of a *disorganized* religion. That sounds terrifying. Theologian Douglas John Hall notes that for us, "Religion functions as an organized expression of belief," however "faith," he suggests, "is a 'dialogue with doubt.'" It's a personal reckoning with God's involvement in the world, and God's investment in our own lives. Hall has argued quite convincingly that "one of the great themes in twentieth-century theology [and by extension, the church, down to our age] was the chronicling of Christianity's fall from faith to religion." [2] There are many reasons for this. One might be that it's easier for the church to teach people *about* religion, that is, all the beliefs of the Christian religion, all the things that one believes or ought to believe as a Christian. It's easier to over-intellectualize Christianity, which Presbyterians are good at, and just talk about the belief, discuss beliefs that usually require little commitment from us. And that is *tragic*. Because religion gets reduced to a system of beliefs, ideas, and doctrines, which we then put forth, argue, debate, and need to defend, sometimes by the sword. We're left with religion as a container of religious beliefs. It feels static and dead.

But we are invited to something more than dead religion.

Instead, the Bible gives witness to faith as a relationship, a "trust-walk." I was surprised to learn, recently, just how often words such as "walk" or "walking" are found in the Hebrew

scriptures and the New Testament. We are invited to walk with God because God walks with us. We are searching for those paths that lead us to life, and we remember that even though we walk through the valley of death, we are not alone. “His rod and his staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23 4). When Jesus invited disciples to follow him, he essentially said, “Come, walk with me, and I will show you the way.” The Bible bears witness to the story of humanity walking with God out of the garden into the world, fulfilling God’s mission to love and redeem. It’s the story of a people, individually and collectively, walking with God. A trust-walk. Relational. Dynamic. Fluid. Moving. Alive. Faith that is alive, passionate—and hot because it has to do with love, with whom we love. *Agape*, yes, selfless, other-oriented love. Sure. But also, *eros*, desire. “Faith is a matter of desire,” Kenda Dean reminds us, “a desire for God and desire to love others in Christ’s name—which results in a church oriented toward bearing God’s self-giving love to others, embodied in a gospel-shaped way of life.”[3]

“I have heard of your faith among the saints,” Paul says. Faith alive in community. The letter was written to the church, the *ekklesia*, and read aloud in worship. And it’s there—here, too—faith within the church, in a community that experiences, witnesses, and shares in the life of God in the world. That’s what Paul is praying for. He’s praying for all of them and, by extension, praying for us, this church, and every church. We can only follow Christ in community. We can only claim the name Christian when we are following Christ, following with Christ’s people, and following Christ together. We need each other to help us be more faithful, be better walkers. We can only be the church together. We *get* to be the church together.

That’s what Paul wants the Ephesians to know. It’s why our study of Ephesians is so relevant for the living of these days. In his marvelous commentary on Ephesians, Stephen Fowl (who until this past summer was professor of New Testament at Loyola College here in Baltimore) stresses this important point. Paul presumes that the Christian life “entails a relationship both to Christ and to other Christians. Faith in Christ apart from love for the saints is dead or incomplete; love for the saints apart from faith in Christ reduces the church to just another social service provider.” [4] Sure, we can provide social services, but we are more than that. We are together the locus, the place, the people where God is uniquely at work in the world, where God is forming and reforming a people, a beloved people, whose hearts are enlightened and warmed by grace—amazing grace—which God has lavished upon us, extending, living into hope, bearing witness to the wisdom of God, to the power of the Risen Christ alive within us and through us in the world. All this is what life with the saints, God’s holy people, looks like and feels and can only be discovered and experienced in the church, connecting with Christ, connecting with one another, connecting with ourselves, connecting with the world.

Connection.

Despite our low estimation of the word “religion” these days—people love to say, “I’m spiritual but not religious,” and, by the way, you won’t find the word “religion” anywhere in the Bible—that said, a *living* religion, like living faith, helps us connect. That’s what the word “religion,” from the Latin *religare*, means: “to connect again” or “connect back” or “bind back.” Ultimately, everything comes down to the connection—with God, our neighbors, ourselves, and

the world. "Only connect." It's the final thought in E. M. Forster's (1879-1970) novel *Howard's End* (1910). "Only connect." Forster writes of the character Margaret, "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect..."

Live in fragments no longer. Only connect. That sounds like the church, doesn't it? That sounds like the gospel to me. What do you think?

Sources

- [1] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6-7.
- [2] Unpublished lecture given at the 2009 Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, April 28, 2009, cited in Dean, 7
- [3] Dean, 7.
- [4] Stephen Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 70.