

Jeremiah 31:31, 33–34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Matthew 9:27–31

²⁷As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" ²⁸When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." ²⁹Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith let it be done to you." ³⁰And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, "See that no one knows of this." ³¹But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

"Faith Alone"

Jeremiah 31:31, 33–34; Matthew 9:27–31

When Erik Weihenmayer went blind at the age of 15, he was terrified. "I wasn't afraid to go blind and see darkness," he said. "I was afraid to be swept to the sidelines and forgotten." Fortunately, soon after he went blind, Erik discovered a group that took blind teenagers rock climbing, and after one try, he was hooked. In 2001, Erik became the first blind man to summit Mt. Everest.

In biblical times, Erik's fears of being swept to the sidelines would have been completely justified. At the time, people believed that any kind of hardship or disability, from blindness to poverty, was the direct result of sin. A whole chapter of the gospel of John is devoted to a debate over whether a man who was born blind was being punished for *his* sin or the sin of his *parents*. Jesus' answer to that question is "neither," but most people don't see that as an acceptable – or particularly satisfying – answer. After all, we human beings *like* the idea of consequences. And the most basic understanding of consequences goes like this: *do good and you get rewarded, do bad and you get punished*. For us to discover that this formula doesn't hold – and let's face it, most of us discover sooner or later that **this formula doesn't hold** – can leave us feeling like we live in an uncertain, unpredictable, and capricious world.

Five hundred years ago, the church had a long-standing, theological take on the formula that good actions get rewarded and bad actions get punished. What the church promised its adherents was certainty and predictability in a world that was perhaps even more uncertain, unpredictable, and dangerous than ours...which is saying something. At that time, the church promised that if you did the right things – including attending church services, giving money to the church, receiving the sacraments, confessing your sins and following the priest's instructions regarding penance – if you did all these things, then your **salvation** was secure. Salvation had little to do with God's love, and a lot to do with knowing that when your earthly life came to an end, you'd spend eternal life in heaven rather than hell.

As we heard last week, one of the gifts Martin Luther gave us was the idea that the church and its teachings are not infallible, they must be judged by scripture, and that the scriptures should be read and studied by all the people, not just priests and monks and scholars. Luther's own study of the scriptures led him to question the church's idea that it is our good works that secure our

salvation. Instead, he became convinced that salvation is a result of our **faith alone**, and that faith isn't something we can manufacture for ourselves; it is a gracious *gift* from God.

In five hundred years, our understanding of faith and salvation have evolved or, you might say, continued to be reformed. Many of us who consider ourselves Christian no longer believe that God requires something from us in order to look past our sin, any more than we believe that a loving God demanded the death of God's son as a payment for humanity's sin. Instead, an increasing number of Christians believe that God sees us, first and foremost and always, through eyes of love, and that God's love for us defines us much more fundamentally than our sin ever can. Yet few of us would argue that faith is irrelevant. So what is faith and why does it matter?

In today's New Testament reading, Jesus heals two blind men who follow him until Jesus finally responds to their requests and grants them their sight. As with many such healings, Jesus links the concept of faith to healing. In this episode, he says to the two men after restoring their sight, "according to *your* faith, let it be done to you." These two men appear to be complete strangers to Jesus. There is nothing that indicates he had encountered them before. So how does he have *any* idea what kind of faith they have or that it is enough to merit healing? Before Jesus heals the blind men, he asks them a question that seems to connect faith to belief, "Do you *believe* that I am able to do this?"

Marcus Borg points out in a sermon on faith that most of us use the word faith to refer to belief...particularly belief in religious events or theological claims that we cannot prove. Events like the virgin birth, Jesus's miracles, and the resurrection; theological claims like the existence of God, forgiveness of sins, the sacramental nature of communion and baptism, and so on. So to have faith means to believe in certain theological events and ideas.¹

But even though Jesus also seems to tie faith and belief together, in this story and many others, the people Jesus heals demonstrate little knowledge or belief of such events or claims. In fact, the bar Jesus sets for faith – well, it's incredibly low. What did these men do to demonstrate their faith? They followed Jesus down the street, begging him to heal them, and then, when questioned, they claim to believe he *can* heal them. Is *that* **faith**?

¹ Marcus J. Borg, "Days of Awe and Wonder: How to Be a Christian in the Twenty-First Century." HarperOne, 2017.

From this story, and many, many other stories of Jesus healing people and attributing healing to their faith, we discover that what Jesus means by faith is something different from belief, even if there are times when he acknowledges a connection between the two. **For Jesus, faith seems to be little more than having the courage to ask for help, help for oneself or help for someone else.** Throughout the gospels, the people Jesus heals are the ones who *ask for help*, the ones who take the initiative to get close to him, the ones who are persistent, who ask again and again – even after he tells them no. For Jesus, faith is that end-of-the-rope, desperate hope that there is something greater than yourself that might just be able to change your life for the better. For Jesus, that counts as faith and that is enough.

In that same sermon on faith, Marcus Borg offers three other definitions of faith, all of which work together, in and through us, as we seek to follow God. The first is faith as trust, radical trust in God. The second is faith as fidelity, loyalty to a relationship with God. The third is faith as a way of seeing. Each of these can be better understood by considering their opposites. If faith is trust, then the opposite would be fear and anxiety – and think of all the times in the Bible when people are told, “Don’t be afraid!” If faith is fidelity, then the opposite is infidelity – all the ways we turn away from God and follow idols. And if faith is a way of seeing, the opposite would be a kind of blindness that does not recognize or acknowledge the reality of God’s presence or claim on our lives.

Taking all of that together, what if faith is little more than the courage to put one foot in front of the other, even on our most difficult days, when nothing makes sense, to climb the mountain even when we can’t see what’s in front of us, to believe that, even in the face of all the violence and disaster and assault and division, there is a force for good that is greater and more powerful than all the hate and evil we can throw at it, a force that is creative and merciful and loving, a force we call God? What if, in the face of our helplessness and grief and fear and idolatry and willful blindness, faith is what enables us to ask Jesus to help us, to heal us?

When our children were babies, we read a saying in some parenting book: sleep begets sleep. It seemed counterintuitive, but it proved to be true: the more sleep our babies got, the more and better they slept. It was when they got overtired that sleep became increasingly difficult and elusive. I have come to believe that the same saying applies to faith. No matter how much we may

struggle to understand it, faith begets faith. When we are willing to trust that there is more going on than we can see or understand, we slowly but surely grow more comfortable offering God our radical trust and loyalty, even in the most difficult circumstances.

Tom Long tells a story of a church he served that puts their teenagers through an intense eight-week confirmation classes. Then on Pentecost Sunday they line up their confirmands in front of the congregation and have them profess their faith by showing off the students' memory work. One particular year the students memorized a portion of Romans 8. "George," the teacher asked the first student in line, "what is to separate you from the love of God?" George took a deep breath and said, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." George beamed. George's parents beamed. The congregation beamed. The teacher went on to the next student. "Mary what will separate you from the love of God?" Mary went on to recite the glorious ending of Romans 8. And so it went, but as the teacher went from student to student, the congregation's anxiety grew, because at the end of the line was Rachel, a child with a radiant smile and a warm grace who had Down Syndrome. Everyone knew there was simply no way she could memorize Romans 8, but the question drew closer, until finally the teacher asked, "Rachel, what shall separate you from the love of God?" Rachel beamed and said simply...Nothing.²

This is biblical faith, faith that goes beyond belief or intellectual consent, faith that includes trust and loyalty and a total shift in perspective, faith that anchors us firmly to our God of love and grace. This is faith, a precious gift from our gracious God. And this faith, alone, is enough. Amen.

² From Tom Long's sermon, "Deeper."

Pastoral Prayer
The Rev. Melanie Marsh Baum

Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire, let us thine influence prove; Source of the old prophetic fire, fountain of life and love.

Hear our prayer: You are the Creator of all, and you entrusted the earth to the human race. Yet we disrupt its peace with violence and corrupt its purity with our greed. Prevent your people from ravaging creation, that coming generations may inherit lands brimming with life.

Come, Holy Ghost, for moved by thee the prophets wrote and spoke, unlock the truth, thyself the key, unseal the sacred book.

Hear our prayer for the church: that we may proclaim your salvation to all. Strengthen those whom you choose today, that they may faithfully endure all trials. Fill all people with your Holy Spirit that they may bear each other's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Expand thy wings, celestial Dove, brood o'er our nature's night; on our disordered spirits move, and let there now be light.

Hear our prayer for the nations of the world: that you would hold us all in your mercy. We give you thanks for those who put themselves in harms way, who serve, and fight, and die for their countries, and for the families that love and support them. Preserve the people of every nation from tyrants, heal them of disease, and protect them in time of upheaval and disaster, that all may enter the kingdom that cannot be shaken.

God, through the Spirit we shall know if thou within us shine, and sound, with all thy saints below, the depths of love divine.

Hear our prayer for peace: You created humanity for salvation, not destruction, for love and compassion, rather than hatred, and sent your Son to guide us in the way of peace. Enable people of every race and nation to accept each other as sisters and brothers, your children, created in your very image.

Compassionate God, you gives rest to those weary with heavy burdens. We pray for all who suffer any sorrow or trial. Heal the sick in body, mind, and spirit. Lift up those who are in despair. Befriend those who grieve. Comfort the

anxious. We pray especially for Judy, Randy, Andrew, Akeya, Rich, Gabe, Eliseo, Anne Marie, Greg, Elizabeth, Patrick, Ron, Olitana, Robert, Tom, Liam, and Doug. We Hold in our hearts all those who enter our doors throughout the week and whose names have been left in our carpenter's box (...) We also remember all those we have lost to gun violence in recent days and weeks. May they and those who love them find solace in your embrace as we remember their lives with the tolling of the bell...

We trust that you will answer our prayers with grace, and fulfill your promise that all things work together for good for those who love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray saying: **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**