

McCabe United Methodist Church
Faith for the 21st Century (part 2): Finding & Redefining Faith
Exodus 6:2-8, Philippians 1:3-11
Pastor Ray Baker
3-4-12

Pastor Rick and I are preaching a series called “Faith for the 21st Century.” Last week I spoke about the difference between the “Wisdom” of our world: wealth, power, and prestige; versus the “Alternative Wisdom” of Jesus: mercy, justice, and humility. Today we will look at the topic of Finding and Redefining Faith for the 21st Century.

About ten years ago two pastors were working at a youth event. The challenge of their partnership was their divergent theologies and approaches to ministry: conservative to fundamental and liberal. Their lack of clear communication didn't help the matter one bit.

When no one was in the room the conservative pastor made a sign and placed it on a chair. The sign said: Christ. When the youth and the other pastor came back into the room the second pastor went and sat in the chair. The first pastor took a moment to explain his idea to the group. He identified a “Christ Chair” to remind everyone Christ is in their midst. His one request was that no one would sit in the chair, because it was reserved for Christ.

The second pastor reached out his hand and said: “May the Christ in me welcome the Christ in you.” He was referencing an old Shaker tradition which focused on bible verses like:

“Do you not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you?” II Corinthians 13:5

“To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Colossians 1:27

I firmly believe that both pastors were men of great faith, even though they approached their faith and their beliefs differently.

An important issue for Christians in the 21st century is for us to grow in our understanding of faith. We commonly make the mistake of defining our faith and beliefs as the same thing. Our beliefs are important, but our faith is greater than our beliefs. If we all have to believe the same things, the same way we will find more and more reasons to divide the Body of Christ.

Personally I think having more than 1,000 denominations in the Christian Church is more than enough.

I believe that “Faith” in the 21st Century needs to be based on belief in God and Jesus Christ, but it also needs to focus on the importance of the relational aspect of our Faith.

Today’s first bible lesson, Exodus 6, is one of the earliest statements that help us understand that our Faith has always had an important relational aspect. The matriarchs and patriarchs of our faith related to God as: “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” It was from this relationship that they were able to identify God was their God and they were God’s people. (This phrase is also found in Matthew 22:32 and the book of Acts 3:13.)

Mother Teresa also promoted the relational aspect of Faith on her business card:

The fruit of SILENCE is Prayer, the fruit of PRAYER is Faith, the fruit of FAITH is Love, the fruit of LOVE is Service, the fruit of SERVICE is Peace.

We find God and our faith by participating in prayer. The fruit of prayer is Faith. One of the best ways to find our faith is to pray even when we aren’t sure that anyone is listening.

When I was in High School I was taught to pray by imagining that Christ was sitting in the chair next to me. I approached prayer as if it was a conversation, and it is. It’s a conversation between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and God’s people. It’s a conversation that started thousands of years ago.

“On Sunday morning, October 31, EgyptAir Flight 990 crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off the island of Nantucket. Almost immediately, crisis teams began to converge on Newport, Rhode Island, where all recovery efforts and family support were based. Mid-Monday morning, I got the call, inviting me to join the Red Cross spiritual care team. As a clinically trained chaplain working in a hospital, I have experience dealing with families and loss. But this invitation made me anxious; I had never before been involved with such an intense disaster. And I assumed that as a rabbi, my services would not be required or appreciated for dealing with an Egyptian Airlines crash. I was quickly assured that the request was for chaplains from all faith traditions.

“Monday afternoon I drove to the Doubletree Hotel in Newport where passengers' relatives were going to be lodged. Shortly after I arrived, the first bus load of families

pulled in. As they disembarked, a sense of helplessness descended upon me. The grieving relatives milled around, lost, wounded and confused. I also felt lost and confused, acutely aware that I was the wrong religion, the wrong culture, speaking the wrong language. Sometimes it was hard to tell who were family members and who were people there to help. I approached one woman who looked tired and upset; she turned out to be a worker.

“At the first family briefing on Tuesday morning, a representative from each faith tradition spoke to let them know that chaplains were available and that religious services would be held. Wearing a kippa, I was easily identifiable as a Jew and perhaps as a rabbi as well. Afterward, people approached me - looking for comfort, looking for me to say the traditional Jewish mourning prayers.

“Regularly scheduled worship services for the Muslims and Christians were established. Although there had been a number of Jews on the flight, relatively few Jewish families came to the hotel. While on scene, I provided counsel to Jewish workers and non-Jewish American families. I held a sobbing Muslim woman in my arms after she had viewed the debris. Not sharing a language, we didn't speak, but there was no need for words. I learned that cultural and religious differences at a time like this are not barriers; everyone cries in the same language.” -Andrea Gouze, *Everyone Cries in the Same Language*.

Our Faithful relationships can and do go beyond culture, religion, and language. We have the opportunity to allow the “Christ within” to reach out to people everywhere: across town, throughout the country, and around the world. Our God and our Faith transcend artificial human boundaries.

Our second reading today was from the first chapter of Philippians which is often called a book of servant hood. The apostle Paul opened his letter by praising his “partners” in Christ for their faithfulness: standing together and participate in the ministry of Jesus Christ, their relationship to Christ and each other makes them strong, and a shared commitment defines their Faith.

I have two friends named Dale and Susan who have a wonderful marriage, but had a rocky – off and on – courtship. Dale loved Susan and her family loved him. Even when Susan would break up with him, he would still go and visit her family. He stopped in to see her parents and even visited with her grandparents. During family events, like Thanksgiving, it wasn't uncommon for someone to bring up his name or share a story about something funny he had done. If Susan would complain her family would jokingly say: “You broke up with him, but we didn't.”

Their relationship reminds me of the parable of the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd cares for his flock and makes sure they are safe, and goes out to seek the one who is lost. God is like that. God has promised to seek out anyone who is lost. God has promised that we will not be left alone. God will bring us back to the fold and help us live in a faithful relationship with our God.

“In his book *We Are Still Married* (New York: Viking, 1989), Garrison Keillor features a one-page essay entitled *The Meaning of Life*. Its most important point is this:

“To know and to serve God, of course, is why we're here, a clear truth, that, like the nose on your face, is near at hand and easily discernible but can make you dizzy if you try to focus on it hard. But a little faith will see you through. What else will do except faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word.

“What is the last word, then?

“Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet corn and flowers, through sports, music and books, raising kids - all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through.”

Faith in the 21st Century is based on belief in God and lived out in our relationships in and through the Body of Christ. God is found in prayer and experienced in the everyday moments of life. God continues to reach out to us even when we turn our backs on him. God works through our family, friends, and through the Church to invite us back to a Faithful relationship.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is our God and we are his people.