

## **“For the Love of God: Live Obediently”**

**Today’s first Scripture lesson makes it clear that faith in God is a gift from God. After Peter’s great confession of faith, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” Jesus responds, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 16:16-17)**

**The Apostle Paul agrees that faith is a gift when he writes to the Christians in Ephesus, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God....” (Ephesians 2:8-9)**

**Faith is a gift. It’s not something we learn through rigorous study. It’s not something we earn by deeds of love and kindness. It’s not something we find through disciplined, spiritual exercises. Rather, faith is something, someone who finds us.**

**Notice Moses, Elijah, and Paul never speak about their discovery of God.**

**Rather, what they speak about is how God has discovered them**

**through a burning bush;**

**through a still, small voice;**

**through a blinding light on the road to Damascus.**

**A faith and friendship with God is a gift from God. Yet, like with every other gift, we have to accept it. Like with every other relationship and friendship, we have to want God, to be receptive to God, to give God a chance. Contemporary Presbyterian theologian, Frederick Buechner, says it this way. Faith “is not so much believing this thing or that thing about God, as it is hearing a voice that says, ‘Come unto me,’ ...and following that voice.” This means that faith is more than a gift. It also involves our acceptance of this gift. Faith involves doing something.**

**In today’s second Scripture lesson Jesus also teaches that faith is something we do. Listen again for God’s Word to us as I read Jesus’ final words from his Sermon on the Mount.**

**(Please read Matthew 7:21-27)**

**Several years ago at a Prayer Breakfast in Santa Anna, California, I heard Tony Campolo tell a true story about a famous tightrope walker named Charles Blondin. In 1859, Blondin strung a tightrope across Niagara Falls.**

**Starting on the Canadian side, he inched his way across the falls to the American side. When he arrived, ten thousand people were there cheering and chanting his name: “Blondin! Blondin! Blondin!”**

**He quieted the crowd, thanked them for coming, and then announced that he was going back across the tightrope, only this time with someone sitting on his shoulders. “Do you believe I can do this?” he asked the crowd.**

**Again they chanted: “We believe! We believe! We believe!”**

**He quieted the crowd a second time and asked, “Now, which one of you will be that person to get on my shoulders?”**

**The crowd became very, very still, until finally out of that crowd of ten thousand people, one man stepped forward. It was Blondin’s business manager. He was more afraid of the act flopping than of falling into the falls. So he climbed on Blondin’s shoulders and for the next two and a half hours, Blondin inched his way back to the Canadian side.**

**The point of this story is obvious. Ten thousand said, “We believe! We believe! We believe!” but only one really believed.**

**As Jesus teaches in his Sermon on the Mount, faith is more than believing and saying to Jesus, “Lord! Lord!” Faith is also doing God’s will as revealed by Jesus. Faith is more than saying, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...” Faith is also trusting enough in “God the Father Almighty” to follow and to obey.**

**Faith is Noah building a huge boat in the middle of the desert with not a cloud in the sky, all because God asked him to build it.**

**Faith is Moses leading a bunch of ragtag slaves to freedom with the Red Sea in front of them and Pharaoh’s army behind them, all because God has promised, “I will be with you.”**

**Faith is a shepherd boy named David going out to fight a giant named Goliath armed with only a slingshot, five smooth stones, and God’s promise to fight beside him.**

**Faith is hearing Jesus say, “Forgive seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22) and trusting enough to try to forgive even your brother-in-law.**

**Faith is hearing Jesus say, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me,” (Matthew 25:40) and believing enough to serve a meal to homeless people at Broad Street Ministries or to tutor a child at John Gloucester House.**

**Faith is hearing God’s promise to take care of us and then trusting that promise enough to share a tenth of our income with God and others no matter what the stock market does.**

**Jesus teaches, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) A faith in and friendship with Jesus means trusting enough to obey. Faith is something we do.**

**How did you learn how to swim? Certainly not just from studying about swimming from a book. Yes, you probably watched how others did it.**

**Maybe a parent, a sibling, a friend, or an instructor at the Y gave you a few**

**helpful hints. But ultimately you learned how to swim by jumping into the water and doing it.**

**How do you know you like chocolate ice cream and sushi, not necessarily at the same time, and you don't like broccoli and escargot? Only by trying them, tasting them, experiencing them, doing them.**

**Well, it's the same with faith. It comes to us only when we trust enough to dare to do it.**

**Remember how Indiana Jones finally finds the holy grail in the movie *The Last Crusade*? He has to solve a three part riddle to reach the chamber where the chalice that Christ used at the Last Supper has been resting for centuries. After he solves the first two parts of the riddle, he arrives at a huge chasm separating him and the chamber. The clue to solving the final part of the riddle and crossing that chasm reads, "Only in the leap from the lion's head will he prove his worth." Finally Indiana musters up enough courage and faith to step out into the nothingness of that chasm, and miraculously a bridge appears. Notice: It's only when he takes a leap of faith is his faith justified.**

**An ancient Jewish legend states that the Red Sea parted for the Israelites only after one man believed in God's promise enough to step into the water up to his nostrils. (Laurence Kushner, Invisible Lines of Connection, page 101)**

**Faith is something we do, and it's only when we do our faith, do we discover what it promises is real and true.**

**A couple of years ago I attended a day long retreat where all of us shared with each other how and when our Christian faith became alive and real to us. One man said that he grew up in a Christian home and in the church, but when he started college, he drifted away from his faith,**

**partly because much of what he studied caused him to doubt, and partly because he stopped practicing his faith through regular study, worship, prayer, and service.**

**But then several things happened, nothing too dramatic, just little things, that caused him to miss a sense of purpose and presence that he once had when he believed. He began to want to believe again. He remembered that ancient Biblical prayer, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24), and he prayed it frequently. Yet, nothing happened. No faith came. His**

**doubts remained. He tried to suppress and ignore his doubts and will himself to believe, but again without results. Finally, he decided that if he couldn't make himself believe, he would do what he could do.**

**He couldn't make himself believe, but he could hang around those who did believe, so he started going back to church.**

**He couldn't make himself believe, but he could learn from others who did believe, so he started reading his Bible again and some other books by people of faith.**

**He couldn't make himself believe, but he could do what many believers did every day. He could pray.**

**He couldn't make himself believe, but he could try to follow and obey the One in whom he wanted to believe.**

**“I can't tell you exactly when it happened,” he said, “but gradually I no longer felt alone, and I knew, I just knew, that who Jesus says he is and what he teaches about life are true, and I have felt this way ever since.”**

**In today's second Scripture lesson Jesus makes it clear that this is often the way faith happens. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven." Faith is something we do. It involves following, and obeying.**

**Now I can't think of a time in my own life when I have obeyed God and been sorry. Oh, the road may have been steeper, the tasks tougher, the sacrifices greater, but so have been the joys and the satisfactions. I've also discovered, to my amazement, that whenever I've followed and obeyed, I've not been alone.**

**When Marion's brother, Carl, was in college, he worked as a forest ranger in Colorado during the summers. One summer, when I was visiting him, I wanted to hike to a lake in the mountains to fish. Carl wasn't interested in going, but he gave me a map, marked it, and explained the way. It looked so complicated and difficult to me that I finally said, "Maybe I'd better try my luck in the stream just up the road."**

**Evidently Carl heard in my voice not only my reluctance, but also my disappointment, for he said, "Oh, come on, I'll go with you."**

**Often in life you and I need more than a map. We need a guide. Well, our God just doesn't give us a map, a Bible, a creed, a list of commandments. God also promises to go with us. (Matthew 28:18-20) God just doesn't give us directions from afar. God joins us on our journey...and this is the best part. But we'll never know this until we trust and follow. This is the way you and I become disciples of Jesus Christ. This is the way we give God permission to come to us and to befriend us along the way.**

**Let us pray:**

**Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief.**

**Inspire us, empower us to follow.**

**Come to us, meet us along the way. Amen.**