“The Call to Faith”

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I wanted to ask Margaret this morning if I might share an exchange we had only this week, when I asked a bit about how she is doing here in Blue Hill, because she moved here not very long ago. Things are different in our small community – different from Toronto and different from Jamaica. It must have been hard to move here. Margaret said that when I preached some time ago about Abraham having just up and gone when he knew God asked him to go felt very familiar. I pray along with Margaret that all the good reasons God must have in mind will become clear even now—or soon—so that Margaret’s faith will be supported, even by the kind of trust that we humans so often need. In general, what might we do as individuals and as the Congregational Church in Blue Hill if we trust that God knows where we are going. I am struck this week to know ways we must trust as fully in the *path to get* where God wants us to be; as we remember that Jesus helps us to know that the way, the truth and the life are one.

There’s a great story about a stunt man, Charles Blondin, who in 1859 who was going to walk across Niagara Falls on a tightrope. That might not get the same attention today as it would have a long time ago, when people were less accustomed to seeing people risk killing themselves in imaginative ways. Nonetheless, at that time, he drew quite a crowd. People watched him as he crossed over the falls, delicately holding out his arms for balance. Then he crossed over again, pushing a wheelbarrow while the crowd roared its surprised acclaim for his bravery and accomplishment. The way the story is sometimes told, before he made his third trip across, he asked the crowd, “Do you believe I can push a man across in the wheelbarrow?” They shouted in response, “Of course you can; you can do anything.” One man in the crowd was particularly vocal about his belief in the stuntman’s ability. So, the stuntman pointed to him and said, “All right, then, get in!” Now that was something else altogether. He believed, but not that much. He was not about to commit himself to that belief.” Turns out that later that same year, Blondin’s manager did, in fact, allow himself to cross over *in* the wheelbarrow.

There is belief, and then there is faith. There is trust, and then there is faith.

Sure, Abraham believes that God will make good on his covenant promises to him. Sure, Abraham trusts that God will provide. Those are pretty abstract concepts in terms of Abraham’s behavior, though. And think about it: I am suggesting that faith is the more substantive quality, which we might define along with the author of the letter to the Hebrews as: “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Trust may be something we can build; something we can grow, but it is not generally something that causes us to *act* in a manner in which we and those who meet us might recognize as a way of life.

“You have to earn my trust.” You have betrayed my trust . . . These sound like lines out of an episode of the Brady Bunch, or out of a parenting guidebook. Trust is about power held in the hands of one, and somehow doled out; measured in accordance with the degree to which we do what is expected. This is not faith, though. Faith is a two-way street with Grace in the place of power, and God’s love receiving our doubts and our trust.

This is different from some of the things, some of the actions we might describe as faithful in our everyday lives. I have watched gymnastics performances involving two throwers who doubled as catchers. Things changed in my perspective when my own daughter progressed enough in the sport that she began to seemingly defy gravity. Just before her own first competition, I watched a televised event of the best gymnasts, and the commentator spoke of the sometimes painful lessons along the way to flawless performance. I was reminded of this when reading this week about Blondin, wondering what some of his earlier practice runs had look—and had felt like. Gymnasts and cheerleaders who build pyramids and do somersaults vaulted from the shoulders of others have a trust built on experience. This is very different from having faith in their teammates, although that might be a word we would use to describe it. Faith is, after all, the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Blind Faith—and I don’t mean the band—has more to do with Abraham and the hemorrhaging woman, and the promise and the outcome are far more powerful than a stunt on which we can rely nine times out of ten. Faith is about the promise of relationship with an ever *unfailing God* and our response to God*.* Our lives are all about action, after all, and when we live lives of faith, our actions will reveal that faith. Abraham is called out of comfort and is called to greatness through his progeny. But what about the woman who *reaches out* for healing? Does our faith call us to wait upon the Lord—that is, do we wait for Jesus to touch our hearts, or do we reach out to touch the hem of his garments, the promise of his love? We may well risk the ridicule of disbelievers, of people who trust but who have no faith. Yet, we may be like the synagogue leader, whose faith along with Jesus’ actions in the face of the skeptical, laughing believers was enough to bring to life his beloved daughter. Jesus had called to others, and the synagogue leader responded.

What does faith do in the life of Matthew, a sinner—a tax or toll collector, and someone whom the Pharisees would set apart as somehow unclean? He has lived on the long end of hatred and fear, but he answers “yes” to Jesus’ call that he live in faithful acceptance, and we know that God’s answer to him is also yes. Yes, you are loved; yes you are welcome here. The woman who had lived years of her life in shunned, seemingly visible impurity is made pure because she had faith that Jesus could cure her. She says yes to something she has not yet seen, and she reaches out for healing. God says “yes” to her faithful reaching out, and she is saved from the painful separation from humanity that her illness brings.

The 4th and 5th century theologian, St. Augustine, wrote that “Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe.” We are impatient people, though, aren’t we? I know that my own sense of time is based on my current reality: I trust in what I can see, what I can remember, and what I feel capable of controlling about my own future. When I allow my faith in God—God who was before time, and before matter and before sin and doubt—when I allow my faith in God to admit that some healing will be outside of what I can know now, I find that I see more evidence of God’s healing work even today. And when I doubt, and of course when life’s challenges arise, I can struggle with the best of doubters . . . When I doubt, I look to others to bolster my faith. We need a community of faith to nurture *our* faith. We need Jesus to remind us that God loves us and is with us, and we need each other to be Jesus’ hands and feet even now. How will we do that together this week? Will you help me to have faith? May I help you to have faith? Let it begin with us. Amen