

Problem: What does it mean to have faith?

-When I was up at Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp last week, I noticed at every check-in table counselors taking cell phones. There was a little disappointment from some of the kids and their families, but the counselors had a quick response: we don't want you to be distracted. It dawned on me as I was participating in the evening campfire worship and seeing 150 kids singing their hearts out and hugging each other: FLBC is teaching these kids faith. A lot of their worldly concerns were stripped and what was left was an opportunity: to learn how to trust something beyond yourself without distraction.

-As I have gotten older and thought more about what faith means in general, the power of what the Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp is trying to teach these kids resonates in huge ways. Faith for me has become a lot more like that feeling at camp verses the feeling you get when you see missionaries coming up your driveway to knock on your door.

-But I still ponder a lot of the time what faith actually means. Is it a behavior, or an act, or an ideal? Is it a concept or an emotion? When we say that we have faith Jesus Christ or that Jesus has faith in us, what do we mean?

Solution: Faith is resting in God's promise without distractions

-I remember as a little kid watching and waiting for my Dad to come home from work. A lot of times he would call the house and tell my Mom that "he was on his way home from work." My parent's house sits at the bottom of a hill that curves at the bottom and I would remember the excitement of seeing a familiar car round that final bend and pull into our driveway. Sometimes during the summer I would go out in our front yard and play, waiting for my Dad to round that final bend and be home.

-For faith to happen, I think to start with, there has to be a promise. In his phone calls, my Dad made a promise to come home safely which I had great faith in. Sometimes he would get stuck in traffic, or get delayed by catching somebody he needed to talk to briefly at work on his way out, or even witness his car not starting from a dead battery (this happened definitely a few times!), but he would always make good on his promise and eventually come home.

-I, myself, was driving home from work this last week and saw a bumper sticker that read: "Just have faith!" I thought to myself: "wow if it were only so simple!" I got to thinking about this more and more and have come to disagree with what this bumper sticker is suggesting. If faith requires two parties, a putting of trust in a promise, then faith requires a backing up of this promise. I can't "just have faith" if my Dad promised to come home and then never showed up. I'm not going to have faith in someone who promises that they love me but then never give me any attention or affection. I can't have faith if the other party doesn't live up to this promise. "Just having faith" is cheap, fake, and actually not really what faith is about.

-A lot of our scripture readings today talk about this reality of faith which might be helpful for us.

-In the story of Abram (later to be Abraham), we witness a man who three faith traditions point to as the “model of faith”, but who’s faith wavered quite a bit. We forget that Abram fled to Egypt, even pretended that Sari was his sister in order to protect himself, because he didn’t fully trust God’s promise. Even in this story today, we can see this wavering as he says: “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless. You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” I can put myself in Abraham’s place, wanting to do things myself and not leave myself too exposed. How many times do we have those “what the (bleep) am I doing” moments where we are about to throw out this whole faith thing all together? Yet, for me, it seems like something always leads me back to that trust. Sure enough, in verse 6, it says: “And Abram believed in the Lord.” Another way to translate the Hebrew is: “And Abram *confirmed* or *supported* the LORD.” I kinda like this because it shows Abram not “just having faith”, but being a partner. He’s confirming and supporting God’s promise. It’s a two way street and Abraham, in having faith, is saying I’m going to what I can do to support this promise becoming reality.

- Jesus reveals this two-way partnership as well in our Gospel story today. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms.” Unlike some people who read this text as a demand, I don’t think Jesus is “requiring” faith in this text at all. Instead, I think he is creating faith: creating the opportunity to confirm and support God’s promise in him.

-“Jesus creates faith by announcing a promise: Like a parent loves her children deeply and desperately and wants all good things for them, so also is it God’s good pleasure to give God’s children the kingdom. Promises create a shared expectation about the future and bind together the giver and receiver of the promise in that shared anticipation. Promises create relationship. Promises create hope. Promises create faith.” -David Lose.

Implication: What does it mean for us to not be distracted?

-This brings me back, then, to camp and cellphones. What makes camp so powerful for those kids is not really the games and songs, but I would argue the uninterrupted. These kids are not being distracted by other things and so, for many of them maybe for the first time in their lives, actually have the time to dig deeper. Because how can we fully confirm and support God’s promise if we are not able to fully concentrate on confirming and supporting God’s promise?

-Abby’s and my working on “getting away from the computer”= us showing each other that we have faith in each other.

-This is why “getting away” and “unplugging” is so important. It’s not only a chance for us to recharge and rest, but I would argue, it provides moments for us to actually learn

faith. It's a chance for all of us to have an undistracted moment and confirm the promise which God has made to each and every one of us.

-Faith has to be learned and cultivated. Faith has to be appreciated and worked on.

Faith has to be struggled with. Faith has to be a two-way street.

-May each of us find the time to "un-plug" and live faith in deeper ways. May we not see faith as a badge of honor, but as a conversation and partnership. Finally may we be able to grow, confirm, and support this partnership in the good times and the bad.

Amen.