

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Acts 10:44-48

No sooner were these words out of Peter's mouth than the Holy Spirit came on the listeners. The believing Jews who had come with Peter couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on "outsider" non-Jews, but there it was—they heard them speaking in tongues, heard them praising God.

Then Peter said, "Do I hear any objections to baptizing these friends with water? They've received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did." Hearing no objections, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then they asked Peter to stay on for a few days.

A little nun was on a much-desired mission assignment to the Apache Indians. She was so excited that she drove past the last gas station without noticing that she needed gas. She ran out of gas about a mile down the road, and had to walk back to the station. The attendant told her that he would like to help her, but he had no container to hold the gas.

Sympathetic to her plight, he agreed to search through an old shed in the back for something that might suffice. The only container that would hold fuel was an old bedpan. The grateful nun told him that the bedpan would work just fine. She carried the gasoline back to her car, taking care not to drop an ounce. When she got to her car, she carefully poured the contents of the bedpan into the tank.

A truck driver pulled alongside the car as the nun was emptying the container into the tank. He rolled down his window and yelled to her, "I wish I had your faith, Sister!" (I wish it worked.)

The word "faith" is one of the most widely used words in the NT. It is a word that Christians use a lot—sometimes too much—and I say that because we don't always consider what faith really is. A biblical definition of the word "faith" must include the understanding of being active. Saying one has faith defines faith as a passive belief. According to the biblical understanding of faith, it is more accurate to think of faith as an active term—"being faithful"—than in a passive tense—"having faith." Being faithful is more a distinct way of acting than a thing or state of mind, like having faith. Faith is more than knowing that God is an impressive living being; it is knowing that God does something. That is why there is no real contradiction between faith and works, which is a point some people may argue over needlessly.

The true miracle of faith is faith. The true miracle is the miracle of faith. Let's think about this using some examples from the Bible to help us understand what I mean. Do you remember the story of Joshua and the battle of Jericho? Victory for Joshua took place not when the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. The real victory occurred when Joshua had confidence, as incredible as it seemed, that God would do something great that day. The moment Joshua took that first step around Jericho, and blew that first horn, the battle had already been won. The rest of the story was just telling us what actually happened next.

The victory for David was not when he slew the giant Goliath. The real victory for David was the miracle of faith. That happened in the moment David took that first step down into that valley, and in doing so, conveyed his faith in God's promise, that was the real moment the victory was won. The rest was just telling us how David defeated Goliath.

The miracle of Peter's walking on water was not how far he got without sinking. The real miracle occurred when Peter lifted his leg over the side of the boat and stepped out into the deep

unknown. That step was the miracle of faith. The rest of the story just reveals to us what happened next.

In the scripture we read today, we learn the good news that the Gentiles—those who thus far were forbidden to be in the Christian group, those until up to this moment, the Jewish Christians believed were not selected to be God’s highly valued and chosen ones were brought into the inner circle with God. The Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles, just as the Holy Spirit came upon the Christian-Jews. In those days, that would have been inconceivable.

We read about the real miracle of faith in the verses prior to what we read this morning. The real miracle of faith was when a Gentile named Cornelius, an Italian guard, and a man who worshiped God, was obedient to an angel’s instructions: “Your prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God’s attention. Here’s what you are to do. Send men to Joppa to get Simon, the one everyone calls Peter.” Cornelius sent for Peter.

In the meantime, Peter was getting some instructions from God too. In a set of dreams, he saw a sheet with several different animals on it—animals that the Jews did not eat because they were considered unclean. A voice told Peter to kill and eat the meat. At first Peter refused, but when Cornelius’ men showed up to the place where Peter was staying, Peter put two and two together and understood that he was being led by the Spirit called to go to the home of this Gentile. So, Peter went with some men who were with him.

The miracles of faith occurred in those moments when Peter and Cornelius were obedient to the voices they each heard, and they crossed over the invisible line that separated the Jews and the Gentiles. The rest, the part of the story that we read today is just telling us what happened. The story of the pouring out of the Spirit on the Gentiles is important and wonderful, but if Cornelius and Peter had not stepped out in faith, this would never have happened.

How do we recognize whether we are displaying faith or merely maintaining a hopeful belief? Martin Copenhauer spends a whole chapter in his book, “Living Faith While Holding Doubts,” making the crucial distinction between faith and belief. Belief, he says, is an act of the intellect. Faith, on the other hand, is an experience of the whole person. “We may believe that God has ‘the whole world in his hands,’ but faith is the act of trust by which we put ourselves into God’s hands”. Copenhauer cleverly uses the James 2:19-20 text that drips with satire to show how belief can be passive, but faith is always active: It says there, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe - and shudder.”

Copenhauer continues: “We can sit back and believe, but we cannot sit back and have faith. If faith is to be properly understood, it must be understood as a verb. Faith is something we do. Indeed, if language would allow, we would say something like this: ‘I faith sometimes. I wish I could faith more often. In fact, I’m working toward faithing in God in all that I do.’ That may be grammatically painful, but it is theologically correct”.

Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It goes on then to give examples of faith none of which are passive. There are many more examples that could be cited. But these citations and others not mentioned, remind us, as named by an unknown commentator, that faith is a gift - Our faithfulness is a gift by the grace of God. As Martin Luther rediscovered to his great relief, justification is through faith but is always mediated by grace.

Faith opens the door to salvation, as cited in Acts 10:43 saying, “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” and in John 1:12, But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,“ both specifically link the forgiveness of sins with faith in Jesus Christ. Did you

hear the action words in those verses? The prophets testify so people could believe and have salvation; and those who receive him, also receive salvation.

Faith is obedience. Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another; John's epistle reminds us to obey all God's commandments so that our faith will have the power to witness to the world.

Faith is trust and trusteeship in God's power. The disciples fail in their first attempts to drive out demons because they lack trust in the power of faith and therefore cannot be trustees of God's power.

Faith is healing - Both the woman with the hemorrhage and the blind Bartimaeus are miraculously healed through the power of their faith alone.

And Faith is inclusive - The book of Acts demonstrates how faith makes possible God's adoption of all as God's "chosen" people.

Jim and Phillip did everything together when they were kids. They even went to high school and college together. After college they joined the marines together. They were both sent to Germany, where they fought side by side in one of history's ugliest wars.

During a fierce battle, they were given the command to retreat. As the men were running back, Jim noticed that Phillip hadn't returned with the others. Jim begged his commanding officer to let him go after his friend, but the officer forbade the request, saying it would be suicide. Jim disobeyed and went after Phillip. His heart pounding, he ran into the gunfire, calling out for Phillip. A short time later, his platoon saw him hobbling across the field carrying a limp body in his arms. The commanding officer shouted at him for his outrageous risk. "Your friend is dead," he said. "There was nothing you could do."

"No sir," Jim replied. "I got there just in time. Before Phillip died, he said, 'I knew you would come.'"

Can God count on your faithfulness? Can God count on your faithfulness to be more than belief alone, to be active and not merely passive? Can God count on your faithfulness to come running after him, to join him in the battle to change the world? Can God count on your faithfulness? May it be so. Amen.