

*“Faith and Understanding”*

Clearly, the theme of today’s Lectionary Epistle Reading is Faith. What is Faith? Our Scripture provides hints in **verse 1**, *“To have Faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see.”* Being “sure” – being “certain” of what “we hope for” or what “we cannot see” are important components of faith.

Unfortunately, there are some popular and incorrect understandings of Faith and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews may well have encouraged such faulty knowledge of Faith by what was written in **verse 2**, *“It was by their faith that people of ancient times won God’s approval.”* The difficulty posed by that verse is it could be understood to be claiming faith is a work one does to earn or win “God’s approval.” That is what many people believe but the Apostle Paul and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews made it clear our Forgiveness and Faith are Gifts, which our Divine Parent has given to us! They have been revealed through Jesus Christ. We did not purchase them or earn them.

So, if Faith is not a works righteousness, then what is it? Before giving a specific positive answer, let me rule out another frequent misconception. Magic – for some, Faith and prayer, are both magical! Unfortunately, especially because the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are very terse or limited in their descriptions of the situations or conversations between Jesus, his disciples, and others, there are many portions of those gospels, which may seem to be supportive of thinking of Faith as magic. For example, Matthew 17:17-20 may be interpreted by some to indicate Faith is a magical activity. When Jesus’ disciples were unable to heal a young boy, the father went to him and explained the disciples had been asked to heal the boy but they were unable to do so. **In verses 17-18**, *“Jesus answered, ‘How unbelieving and wrong you people are! How long must I stay with you? How long do I have to put up with you? Bring the boy here to me!’ Jesus gave a command to the demon, and it went out of the boy, and at that very moment he was healed.”*

Thus far, it wasn’t clear to whom Jesus was referring to when he got upset by the “unbelieving and wrong” “people”. But, verses 19-20 indicated it might have been Jesus’ disciples. **Matthew 17:19-20 reported**, *“Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked him, ‘Why couldn’t we drive the demon out?’ ‘It was because you do not have enough faith,’ answered Jesus. ‘I assure you that if you have faith as big as a mustard seed, you can say to this hill, ‘Go from here to there!’ and it will go. You could do anything!’”* So, the disciples were unable to heal the boy because they did not have enough Faith. Of course, when this situation took place, Jesus had not yet been crucified and raised from the dead, so they had not yet received the Gift of Faith from God, which was proven faithworthy and trustworthy through Jesus’ Resurrection.

Now, we are moving into the positive answer for what is Faith. Rev. Kathryn Matthews pointed toward it when she compared it to the cognitive work of studying the Christian Faith, such as going through a Confirmation program. She said, **“Memorizing questions is easier than cultivating a deep, personal relationship with the One we have faith in, the One we trust.”** Matthews continued, “How does it affect our reading of this passage if we think of faith as trust, rather than intellectual assent?” She concluded by asking, “Do we actually ‘know’ something simply because we have memorized it, or is this kind of knowledge more a matter of the heart?” (“Living into the Promise”, on Weekly Seeds by Rev. Kathryn Matthews)

I indicated Matthews was pointing toward a good answer for the question of “What is Faith?” However, instead of talking about it as “knowledge” which is “more a matter of the heart”, let’s focus on what she said about “cultivating a deep, personal relationship with the One we have faith in, the One we trust.” Faith is being in Relationship with our Divine Parent! It is God Who gives us this New Relationship with our Creator, one another, and with other persons. We have faith, if we trust – depend on – agape love God and God’s Son, Jesus Christ. We receive this Gift of Faith because our Maker has revealed God’s Gifts of Forgiveness, Healing, and Radical and Extravagant Hospitality by putting us in this New Faith Relationship with God by proving our Divine Parent’s Agape Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for us in the Death and Resurrection of God’s Son!

Living out this New Faith Relationship with God is intentionally living the example of the New Life of Agape Love shown in Jesus Christ. Faith enables us to live out this New Relationship and Life. It is when we intentionally depend on or trust God to be Faithworthy and Trustworthy by living out the New Relationship and Life that we are Faithing! This New Faith Relationship and Life inform our Understanding about God, the Universe, and ourselves.

**The author of the Letter to the Hebrews indicated this relationship between Faith and Understanding in verse 3, “It is by Faith that we understand that the universe was created by God’s Word, so that what can be seen was made out of what cannot be seen.”** By the way, if you take into consideration our Call To Worship from Psalm 33, especially the last response by the People, and you add to it the further revelation of the Gospel of John 1:1-5 about the Creator creating the Universe through the Word, then verse 3 from our Hebrews’ Scripture documents the interrelatedness between Jesus – the Son of God – the Word Made Flesh and our Understanding about the Creation of the Universe and Life through our New Faith Relationship with our Divine Parent! Yes, with Faith – being in this New Faith Relationship and living it intentionally, we come to a more complete Understanding of God’s Creation, our Divine Parent, God’s Son, one another, others, and Life! So, it is of great importance and value for us to live by Faith – intentionally live out the New Faith Relationship and New Life in Christ.

Our Reading provided the significant example of living by Faith, which was shown through the Old Testament accounts of Abraham and Sarah. **Hebrews reported in verses 8-12, “It was faith that made Abraham obey when God called him to go out to a country which God had promised to give him. ... By faith he lived as a foreigner in the country that God had promised him. ... For Abraham was waiting for the city which God has designed and built, the city with permanent foundations. It was faith that made Abraham able to become a father, even though he was too old and Sarah herself could not have children. He trusted God to keep His promise. ...”**

Prior to writing about Abraham, the author of Hebrews wrote about how Abel, Enoch, and Noah had lived in Faith. After describing Abraham’s faith story, Hebrews summed up their Faith lived lives in **verse 13, “It was in faith that all these persons died. They did not receive the things God had promised, but from a long way off they saw them and welcomed them, and admitted openly that they were foreigners and refugees on earth.”** Are we, also, really refugees and foreigners on Earth?

Connecting Faith and Understanding again, Hebrews concluded our Reading in **verses 14-16, “Those who say such things make it clear that they are looking for a country of their own. ... Instead, it was a better country they longed for, the heavenly country. And so God is not ashamed for them to call Him their God, because He has prepared a city for them.”**

Like those Old Testament examples of living in Faith, Rev. Kathryn Matthews said, “my grandmother was a woman of faith because she was a strong woman who endured much with the help of the trust she had in God. She had to raise small children on a farm while my grandfather found work in the city in order to support the family. Two of her children died. She suffered many illnesses in her life, including tuberculosis, and gave birth to triplets at home, at the age of thirty-nine in 1929! No sophisticated medical facilities or skilled surgeons were there to help her.”

Matthews continued, “However, my grandmother never wavered in her trust in God’s loving care for her and for those she loved. She loved my grandfather very much, and just a few months after he died – both of them were 88 years old – she hurt her back reaching for one of her great-grandchildren. She spent a few weeks in the hospital, saying good-bye to all of us who loved her, and then slipped into a coma.” Matthews concluded her description of her Grandmother’s life in Faith, “At the very end, surrounded by her daughters, she suddenly sat straight up in her bed, lifted up her arms toward the end of her bed and looked beyond them all, saying with a wonderful smile on her face, ‘Oh ... it is so beautiful!’ And then she died.” (“Living into the Promise”, on Weekly Seeds by Rev. Kathryn Matthews)

Yes, for those biblical examples of living in Faith, for Matthews’ grandmother, for spiritual ancestors, and for us “it was a better country they longed for, the heavenly country”! So, will you and I trust our Divine Parent to unite Faith and Understanding in our intentional living in Faith? Will we boldly trust God to eventually lead us into that “better country” – “the heavenly country” which we have been promised through God’s Son? Will we demonstrate the high importance of God’s Gifts of Faith, Forgiveness, Healing, and Radical and Extravagant Hospitality in the New Faith Relationship and New Life in Christ? **Let’s live in Faith and Understanding as we intentionally live the agape loving New Life in Christ in the New Faith Relationship with God! Amen.**