

# Murial S. Lipp: Faith

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## Faith

Good morning. The subject this morning is faith. This is a hard subject to define. Its meaning, like when you try to pick up wet noodles, keeps getting away from you. But like love, you know it when you see it.

Paul puts faith in the same category with love, yet he says, and I think we'd all agree, love is the greater. But today the subject is faith.

The two Scriptures I'm using are the Romans 10 where Paul attempts to enlarge on the meaning of faith and the Matthew 14, where Jesus walks on water. Paul says we are justified by our faith in Christ – yet not by that alone – but through the gift of grace. It's a two-way street. Faith has a prevailing influence on the will. Paul calls faith the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. I don't know about you, but I have trouble getting my hands around that. This I do understand, however: faith is in our hearts, not our heads. We have only to reach out for it. Perhaps Paul said this to remind those Jews who were among his converts that the laws of Judaism might make this kind of faith difficult to attain. It was not in the keeping of rules that salvation came, but through grace – the love of God that is in our hearts. It is good for those of us in the Church of the Saviour tradition to remember this also. For we, like those early Jewish converts, have many rules. It is not through obedience to our rules that we are saved, but through God's grace.

I do have the gift of faith, and I presume that you do too – at least enough so that you are here today. My faith grew from childhood and youth, watching a grandfather in his eighties stumble up to the Communion rail. I wondered why. What was there in that for him? My parents were part of the framework of our Reformed Church in Denver, PA – my mother a teacher of the Ladies Bible Class for 50 years, and my father an elder. My brothers and I were required to go to Sunday school and church every Sunday. During these years my faith was growing, with more questions than answers – but nevertheless growing. I went through the familiar period of agnosticism in college and afterward. I did not like much of what I saw in the conventional church when I worked for Presbyterian Life magazine in Philadelphia. I became judgmental. I wanted Christians to be perfect – not setting that same standard for myself, of course.

When I moved to N. Y. and began working for the religious book dept. at Macmillan, I met authors who wrote great theology, but they themselves, many of them, had feet of clay. At that time I had a friend in Union Seminary. He had never gotten over his love for a woman in Washington. When I decided to move to Washington to work for a small magazine here – but most important, to decide if my now husband and I could make it together – this Union Seminary friend gave me a picture of a horse to deliver to his former girl friend. She liked horses, he said. She worked for a minister named Gordon Cosby, and they had this crazy church made up of cells. (That's how he described it.) When I walked in the door here I knew I was in a different realm. There is a difference between polite laughter and the laughter of intimacy. It was intimacy that I felt here, and I was hungry for it.

I delivered the picture of the horse to Carolyn, who made short shrift of it, because she was already in love with someone else. But I think of that picture of the horse as God's grace in bringing me to this place that has been my

spiritual home all these years. Shortly after that, I got a letter from my former boss at Presbyterian Life magazine asking me if I'd heard of the Church of the Saviour – and would I be willing to collaborate on an article on it. There was no question in my mind that God wanted me here. Perhaps God said, "Muriel has a lot to learn and a lot to give. I will set her down here. This shall be her garden." And so I began my learnings here – among which was not to judge others so harshly. I myself had feet of clay.

I am sure each one of you has a story like mine on how you happened to come here. Do you call it coincidence, or can you say it was the will of God? I would really like to hear your stories. Who, or what, was the agent that brought you here?

Unlike the Romans scripture, the Matthew verses are a story. It was in the middle of the night, toward morning, when the wind was blowing, that Jesus awoke. Jesus had not embarked on the ship with his disciples. He was exhausted after the feeding of the multitude, so he told them to go ahead and fish. He needed to rest. He went up into the hills to pray alone. I can just imagine him lying on the hillside, praying and sleeping intermittently, in that wonderful combination of rest and meditation we sometimes experience on retreat. He was probably awakened by the howling of the wind, or the rocks poking into his back. He probably said to himself, "My friends are at sea, and I need to go to them." He was, I imagine, refreshed by his rest, during which communion with God had strengthened him. Of course, his friends were terrified when they saw him walking toward them on water. They thought he was a ghost. When they recovered from their fear, impulsive Peter tried to do it too. He succeeded... until he looked away from Jesus. Then he started to sink. The metaphor here (in case you didn't get it) is that we can do miraculous things as long as we keep our eyes on Jesus. When we look away, we sink.

It bothers me that Jesus chastises Peter when he sinks. "O, Ye of little faith," he says. But I think Jesus is really saying

not only to the disciples, but to all of us who come after: faith is a tool through which you can do amazing things. Trust it. Trust what I tell you. Greater things than this you can do.

I keep re-reading a book by Ambrose and Olga Worrall entitled THE GIFT OF HEALING. The Worralls were responsible for the healing of thousands of people over a 50-year period through the use of their gifts. Olga founded the New Life Clinic in Baltimore and participated in dozens of scientific experiments that proved that spiritual healing does work. I visited the Mt. Washington Methodist Church there to see this clinic ten or twelve years ago. The spirit in that room as people came forth for healing was palpable. The Worralls have always been very clear about who was doing the healing. It was the Holy Spirit, and they were the agents. They were people of prayer, with tremendous faith. Both of them had gifts of the paranormal; they had visions and psychic revelations. But they never exploited these. They always used them for the healing of people and the spreading of faith.

Ambrose Worrall says his ministry started when he was a boy. In Sunday school he heard the story of how Jesus anointed a blind man's eyes with clay and spittle, and how when this was washed off the man could see. That morning on his way home, he saw a blind man. Why couldn't he just get some mud and spittle, put it on the man's eyes and heal him? he wondered. The next Sunday he asked his Sunday School teacher about this. The teacher was startled. He said only Jesus could do such things because he was the son of God. But no one else could do such things. Ambrose Worrall, in his young heart, did not believe him. The book goes on to describe the truly miraculous meeting of Ambrose and Olga, their ministry together until their deaths, and their ongoing mission through the New Life Clinic.

Sometime I'd like to see a mission of healing here in Seekers. We have people whose daily work is in this realm, and I

personally would like to see this grow into a mission. I was once part of a healing mission here in Seekers, but it did not succeed. And as in all missions that do not work, we do not pump them up artificially.

We Seekers... How strong is our faith, both individually and corporately? Is our faith threatened by our forthcoming move from this building? I would like to say no, but I'm sure my faith is very much attached to this building. We, I, need to remind ourselves and one another that WE are the church, not a building. And the message will come through us whether we are in a storefront or a cathedral. We will mourn for a time. We will say, as those Jews in Babylon said, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" But we will, I hope, continue to sing that song in a strange place. We will need to fill that new building with our prayers. We'll have to break bread in it, both formally in Holy Communion, and informally through lunches and dinners; teach Sunday school and adult classes in it, laugh and cry, agree and disagree in it – until the walls echo with our faith, hope, and love, just as these walls do.

However, I hope we will hang on to our history and keep re-telling our stories. For some of you, Seekers is your only remembered story. And you will go on into the future as Seekers. But we must learn from our history, Seekers as well as our founding Church of the Saviour. I would like to see more cross-fertilization among the various faith communities, now as well as later. Some of us have gone to Potter's House, Christ House, New Community, and Dayspring to bring the Word. Occasionally we have those brothers or sisters here. I would like to see more of this. I was pleased when young people from Eighth Day came to Sunday school here. We have something to offer them, so why not share it.

Last spring I was asked to teach a course at Wellspring, and the biggest learning for me was to experience the workings of a mission group other than my own. I saw them when their excitement was high on that first night when people came from

all over the country to hear about our churches, and I experienced their touchiness with one another when nerves were frayed and disagreements reigned. It did not matter that it was not a Seekers group. It was a quintessential mission group experience. What do I want for Seekers? I do not want us to go off into the future and cut ourselves off from our roots. I want us always to remember where we came from. I want us to be with our original family now and then. We do not call ourselves faith communities for nothing; we are bound together by our common faith in Christ and a unique way of expressing it.

How many of us come here hungry and thirsty each Sunday? I do. I worship by myself during the week, but it is not the same. I come on Sunday to get from you what I cannot get from my own private worship. Paul exclaims, "How welcome are the feet of the messengers of good news!" Later in Romans he says, "We conclude that faith is awakened by the message, and the message that awakens it comes through the word of Christ." Let me add: that is what we come here hungry to get from one another.

Faith is hard to describe, but you know it when you see it. You know it when you feel it. You know it when you're a part of it.

We have trouble with labels. Jesus' walking on water was certainly a miracle, as was his healing ministry. But he made light of this. You can do it, he said – with faith. Perhaps it does not matter about the labels. What some persons call coincidence, others call the results of faith, or miracles. Paul says, in effect, faith is the reality of eternal, invisible things.

Often we are reluctant to name acts of God. We think we might be wrong; these acts might be just the results of science. But I ask you: is not science itself an act of God? Is not a medication that heals an act of God? And since when is it

wrong to say thank you for anything? Perhaps you turn an ordinary event into an act of faith by saying thank you.

Faith is, I think, the bridge between us and God. God gives us love; that is, grace, and we in turn give God faith. This love affair between us and God has been going on since the beginning of time, in all languages and everywhere. When Jesus came along we were given a leg up, a look inside the eternal mysteries. This is how it is, he said, and the secret cloud behind which God hides was temporarily rolled back. Faith, said Jesus, have faith.

Our four-year-old grandson is learning about God the creator. Once when I was giving him a bath he pointed to a toy duck and said "God made this duck." I thought in all honesty I'd better straighten him out on that. I said, "Well, a person or a machine made the duck, but God made the person." He thought for a while. Then he said, "And God didn't make hamburgers either. McDonald's did."

Speaking about God the Creator, how do you feel about the recent news that there might be, or might have been, life on Mars – or even, as one scientist put it, that we might be descended from Martians? Does it affect your faith? Not mine. God created whatever is, and whatever is larger than anything I could conceive. This is an exciting time to be alive. Our Christian faith has survived Copernicus, Columbus, Darwin, and many other scientists and explorers, and it will survive and grow, whatever comes of this meteorite discovery.

I'd like to leave you with the words of Paul from our Romans Scripture. "The word (of faith which we proclaim) is near you; it is upon your lips and in your heart." Amen.