

John 17:20-26
May 29, 2022

The Meaning of Faith

It is time for the end of the liturgical season called Easter, the season of the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus in particular, and in general of the doctrine of the Resurrection of the Dead, which tells us that Jesus was the firstborn of many, and that we will also join in the resurrection.

Easter means more than the belief in life on the other side of death, for it means a fulness in life, characterized by a litany of words, that even though they are the best words we have, fail to hit the mark: beauty, grace, love, justice, joy, peace, hope. If there are poets among us, perhaps they may be able to press the power of language, but advancing only a few yards. The reality is greater than the ability to speak of it.

One of the central features of life after Easter is that it presents us with an in-between, a time after the departure of Jesus from earth into heaven, the Ascension, and before the consummation of the age, the Return.

It is the time of the Spirit, when the presence of Christ is not material, bodily, but spiritual, in the form of the Holy Spirit, whose coming is observed on June the 5th, on the day we call Pentecost.

So we are believers in an unseen God. In the text from the 17th chapter of John's gospel, it is precisely those

who have come along after the Ascension and before the Return, for those who believe *without* having seen, that Jesus is concerned, and for whom he prays. In other words, Jesus prays for us.

The key word is, "believe." It means, "to have faith in," which means, "to trust." So it is good for us to talk about the meaning of faith. Now we know that the meaning of faith implies the absence of the substance that is the object of the faith. It not only means that we *do* believe in Jesus even though he is not here in bodily form, but also that "faith" is a life pattern. There are many unseen things that we trust. Life wouldn't be possible without faith as a life principle.

People must, "live by faith," as it were, or they wouldn't be able to function. Anyone who has a calendar and makes an appointment, believes without proof that the appointed day and hour will come. We live by faith in what we can't see whenever we drive in a car or turn on a light, or eat a meal, believing that the required nourishment will be used by our bodies to keep us alive and make us strong. Even breathing the air is an act of faith.

Any farmer who plants a crop believes without proof that the sun will rise day-after-day, and the rains come, allowing the mystery of what we call nature to do its work. It does not always; floods, droughts, natural disasters sometimes come along. At the end of the Roman Empire it is said there was a dark age. It is said there was a series of volcanoes that erupted in the northern hemisphere that blotted out the sun for

year and destroyed crops. From the ensuing crisis it took decades to recover, even centuries.

Anyone who has struggled with issues of trust, will know how paralyzing it can be to lack trust. When Paul wrote, “we live by faith and not by sight,” he spoke a greater truth than we may realize, perhaps even he realized. *We do live by faith, all day long everyday.*

We are not creedal here in the baptist movement, and we have good reasons, but the Apostle’s Creed can help us at this point, it begins: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son . . .”

In other words, we do not simply believe in faith as a life-principle, or faith in faith. Our faith takes an object Jesus Christ, or should I say a subject, who is the author and finisher of our faith.

Believing in Jesus is a challenge for anyone who lives in a world in which the assumption is fairly made that people will always act in their own interest. We place our trust in the one who lived a different example. This person, was executed as a criminal.

Furthermore, we believe about him, not only that he was innocent of the charges against him, but that he had some measure of control over his circumstances. He could have walked away, or surrounded himself with armed security and told them not to away their

swords but to draw them. Things may have turned out differently.

But the testimony is that he went voluntarily to his death, making himself a victim of the injustices and contradictions of life that are common in the world, and taking upon himself the burden of the world’s sin. Thus, Jesus offered his life as a sacrifice born of love and concern for people. And we believe that the one who practiced this compassionate love and offered this sacrifice reveals the very nature and character of God.

To place our trust in Jesus is the meaning of our faith, and challenges us to offer our lives also, as living sacrifices, at least, that is the way Paul put it in the twelfth of his Epistle to the Romans. To trust Jesus is to journey towards compassion and love, kindness and generosity, integrity and honor.

It is a journey towards heaven and away from a more self-centered life. So we confidently use the words that fall short; beauty, grace, love, justice, joy, peace, hope, and whatever the poets and songwriters can offer.

We admit from the start the journey is beyond our capability, but we trust that, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, God’s grace will bring us to the destination. That is the meaning of our faith. May it be so.

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