

LUKE 8:1 - 9:50

How is faith in Jesus going to come to people? The first step is need. People come to Jesus for healing in body and mind. But he also heals spiritually by proclaiming forgiveness without asking for anything but an open heart.

Love is the means to inviting people to a spiritual faith as followers and disciples of Jesus. Faith is a prerequisite to entering the communion of the kingdom of God Jesus is bringing. Will people be open in faith to Jesus and to the kingdom even if it comes in a way that no one expects? Will they enter it even if it is nothing like what they've been taught before? Do they have enough faith for that?

This section of Luke offers many stories of those who have faith and those who lack faith because they are afraid or they reject Jesus because he threatens their power and what they have. It is surprising who bears witness to Jesus: demons, women, the sick, socially marginalized and poor, and those who reject Jesus: the ruling authorities. But there are always remarkable exceptions: the ruler of the synagogue for example.

8: 1-3 - Some Women Accompany Jesus

There is a whole community of disciples beyond the 12, and this includes many women. Some of the more prominent women of the group are named. It is interesting that those called by Jesus who become disciples are those who have been healed and redeemed in some way. We all come to God out of some need, not out of a plenitude in need of nothing. We are given faith, hope and love and if we receive these, they take us into the community of discipleship.

8: 4-15 – The parable of the Sower

This parable is the first of the larger parables Jesus tells and it comes early in the narrative because it helps explain why even though there are large crowds that are interested in the healings and in being entertained spectators, few will have the kind of faith to carry them through into discipleship and spiritual transformation.

The vast majority hear the gospel message that comes with the healings and exorcisms. It is about the kingdom of God – a community of relationships that are based on love. The cost of love is repentance toward others and forgiveness of others. That's what builds and grows communion. That's what overcomes conflict, retaliation and bitter grudges. But for most people, the message never sinks in and takes root long enough to bear fruit. Either it never gets received, or it falls away when adversity comes, or materialistic and self-serving concerns choke it from growing. But for those in whom it does take root, there is rich growth in ways that are astonishing.

What does it take for the seed to take root and grow? It takes persistent faith to keep asking questions and seeking Jesus' teaching and insight. Few have the patience or hunger for that. Parables are ways in which the wheat is separated from the weeds.

Those in whom the seed will not grow can find them entertaining, if strange stories. Those who have been grasped by Jesus ask for deeper explanations. Unless people persist in faith, they will never get understanding. Why are people so different? There is mystery here that the parable does not answer.

8: 16-18 – The Lamp under a Jar

If the tiny invisible seed inside us begins to grow, it will flourish in all kinds of ways. If it doesn't grow, it will die. But if it does grow, the fruit it bears will eventually shine for all to see. But initially and for the first while it is doing its work of transformation inside, invisibly at the level of heart and spirit.

8: 19-21 – The True Kindred of Jesus

Jesus' true family is all who respond to Jesus in faith. Clearly, at this point, his family are not totally on side, and so Jesus makes this rather dismissive statement. This will change.

8: 22-25 – Jesus calms a Storm

It takes a lot of faith to trust in Jesus. If we think Jesus calming a storm is incredible, do we have faith in him to help us experience redemption as we live through all kinds of storms in our lives?

8: 26-39 – Jesus heals the Gerasene Demoniac

This is a strange story – especially the interaction between Jesus and a number of demons who then possess a swine herd who end up committing suicide. The key theme though, once again, is faith. The demons bear witness to who Jesus is as does the man who is exorcised of them. The people are terrified and their fear blocks their faith. Jesus leaves them. Clearly there is some collective trauma they are dealing with as people, just like the demoniac himself in chains. Healing and freedom can only come if we have the courage to face our demons and deal with those things in our lives that keep us chained. Are we ready to engage those relationships, habits and sources of oppression keeping us in chains. Do we have the courage to claim our freedom even if people may get upset and threaten us? Can we let go attachments that are keeping us enslaved?

8: 40-56 – A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed

Here are two stories of incredible faith interwoven together. A leading Pharisee of a synagogue comes to Jesus in need. He does this publicly. This is not only humiliating for him since the Pharisees question Jesus' authority to do what he does. But he also risks inciting the anger of his fellow Pharisees. His daughter is ill, though. He is in touch with his need in a way that any social or religious obstacles are overcome. Jesus responds.

But on the way, he stops as he feels healing energy having gone out of him. A woman comes forward who, like the Pharisee, must also overcome public shame. She has a condition that makes her menstruate continually. Any bleeding renders a person unclean and anyone who comes into contact with blood becomes unclean as well. She touches Jesus which should make Jesus unclean. The reverse happens, in fact. Jesus' healing power makes her clean and well. Moreover, she demonstrates such faith in believing a mere touch of Jesus can heal her. The quality of her faith is instrumental in her healing.

This then sets up Jesus' healing of the Pharisee's daughter as an even greater miracle. The delay in getting there has led to her death. Jesus cannot heal her anymore. If he can do anything it must be a resuscitation from the dead. Does the Pharisee and those present have enough faith for that?

9: 1-6 – The Mission of the Twelve

The disciples are now sent out (Apostle means one who is sent) to do the healing works and ministry of Jesus. Healing is a sign that God is working to save and God is defeating the evil powers which imprison people in body, mind and spirit. Jesus is bringing about a new Exodus from slavery. As we will see, the disciples are successful at some level, even though they will have trouble following Jesus when they face the rejection and costliness that will come with their connection to Jesus. More to come on this as the story unfolds.

9: 7-9 – Herod's Perplexity

Herod is concerned because Jesus is another would-be threat to his power. His attachment to power and wealth is an obstacle to the kind of faith that would lead him into the kingdom.

9: 10-17 – Feeding of the Five Thousand

The miracle here is not some magic multiplication of food. It is the kind of possibility of community that can make people share so that all needs are met. Jesus is able to generate such an abundance of food that people are full to overflowing with 12 baskets leftover. 12 represents the tribes of Israel. In Jesus, God is feeding the people again just like God did when they were in the wilderness and manna was given them. In blessing the food, Jesus also "looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them and gave them to his disciples..." The language here is deliberate, to be repeated when Jesus blesses the bread at the last supper. People sharing food and love in community is what Holy Communion is all about. Jesus' body and blood represent the love of God. To build community in a world of conflict and division, forgiveness is necessary. Forgiveness of enemies is the greatest distance love must cross. Jesus will enact this on the cross. More on that to come. In the meantime, this kind of food-sharing and community building is a sign of the kingdom and God's vision for the people.

9: 18-20 – Peter's Declaration about Jesus

Jesus doesn't tell people who he is, but invites them to figure it out based on what they witness him say and do. People have all kinds of theories. The disciples are closer to the truth when they declare him to be the messiah. But do they understand what kind of messiah Jesus is to be?

9: 21-27 – Jesus Foretells his Death and Resurrection

What if the messiah is going to be rejected, tortured and killed, and what if in following him you will all be painted by the same brush? And what if this is the way the kingdom of God's love will truly reveal its glory? Are you prepared to follow that and embrace that? To follow Christ is to turn away from all the glories of the world, gained by rejecting the demands of love. Can you commit to that? As we will see, the disciples have not signed up for this.

9: 28-36 – The Transfiguration

Even as the disciples could question Jesus' messiahship after he began speaking about rejection and death rather than being acclaimed king triumphantly, he is on a mountain where his authority and identity is affirmed by no less than God. Two important Old Testament references are backing up Luke's account. In Daniel, the 'Son of Man' is revealed in all his glory and Elijah is present as the prophet to come ahead of such revelation. Then there is the reference to Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the 10 commandments on tablets of stone. In both Daniel and Exodus, there is blazing white light shining. Jesus is greater than Moses because instead of tablets of stone, God declares that he is the living Word of God. What he says is God's word. Is any further testimony needed? They speak about Jesus' 'departure' or exodus to be accomplished (his rejection and death will lead to his resurrection or new life in the promised land (please remember this is metaphorical)).

9: 37-43 – Jesus Heals a Boy with a Demon

But even with all the testimony and the assurances, faith is a fragile and frail quality that can become weak even when it has been strong. Life can overwhelm any of us in different ways and at different times such that our faith goes out the window. Jesus is discouraged how easily faith in him from people can evaporate. He heals a boy with a terrible condition in spite of the lack of faith around him.

9: 43-45 – Jesus again Foretells his Death

He needs to repeat this because the disciples are not taking it in. Sometimes it's hard to hear what we refuse and are afraid to hear.

9: 46-50 – True Greatness and True Belonging

In order to hear what Jesus is saying about how God's glory can become manifest and God's kingdom can really come alive, the disciples have to overcome their worldly attraction to status, wealth and power. They have to become like children. They also have to become more open and inclusive to outsiders. There are different ways to Jesus, and in this gospel account, outsiders are often better witnesses of faith than those closest to Jesus. It is humbling to witness the power of faith from those we'd least expect it from. But sometimes, when a blessing is too close to us we take it for granted and lose our astonishment at the gift it truly is.