

FAITH AND SELF-WORTH

Hebrews 11: 1-3; 8-12; Mark 2: 1-12

He was a hip looking, smart young man. He came in to my church office to fix my desktop computer. He had worked his way up the company and was very good at what he did. For some reason he wanted to talk to me. He shared with me how easily things came to him in school. He was liked by everyone. He had many friends and he had never asked a girl out on a date who had ever said no. But as he was going to university he became disillusioned, possibly depressed. He had started drinking and had developed a serious problem. He started working, got married, had kids, and still this problem was persistent. But then, he started praying. And God answered his prayer. He got involved in an AA group which helped him turn his life around. Things came together with his family and career. His faith in God and his praying had made all the difference. Whenever he prayed about something specific and believed, he said, God always answered his prayer.

After several more serious conversations we had, the man started coming to church. Even though I was fascinated that he was so into God, something about his faith unsettled me. What would happen if things didn't go so well in his life? What would happen if he stopped getting the kind of answers to his praying he had been getting? The outcomes in his life had been turning out as he hoped they would. What if different outcomes came. Would that mean his praying had failed, that God had abandoned him, that his faith could no longer give him the answers he was looking for?

And sure enough, things did change. He received some bad news about his child. After some frightening experiences over a few nights and after many tests, his child was diagnosed with some rare condition that would affect his physical movement and brain function. It was uncertain how it would all develop in the years ahead, but it would probably be a condition his child would have the rest of his life. If this wasn't bad enough, within a short time after this news, he also lost his job. I was anxious to meet with him and begin a journey of supporting him through his time of trouble. Would his faith in God be able to bear these crosses and would he experience a resurrection on the other side? Would he find some redemptive way of life through his relationship with his child and wife, his way ahead through his loss of a job into something else? Would he find new doors opening as other doors closed?

I never had the chance to find out. The young man drifted away from the church and from contact with me. I never knew what happened to him even though he probably

still lives in the area. Did his faith ever grow into something more robust, mature, profound, rich and durable? Somehow, I fear he is like many in our world - a casualty of failure, disappointment, or misfortune that leaves people wounded and never quite the same... And if he has found a way to walk again it's probably not with God at his side. He may be like many who experience a dying without any resurrection to newness of life.

But this man's story also challenges us to think about our own faith, does it not? Do we have a strong faith in God? And if we do, what do we think such faith is all about? What difference does it make in our lives? What difference can it make?

Let's seek out some revelatory wisdom from our scripture readings.

1) Let's begin with 'Hebrews' as it's called. The 11th chapter out of which our verses are taken is all about faith. The chapter opens with a definition: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith is about assurance. Another word for assurance is confidence. Faith is also about conviction. Conviction about what? Not about what the weather will be today or what shirt looks good with my pants. No. It's conviction about truth and right, conviction that God is an 'ever-present help in time of trouble' as the psalmist professes. But such assurance and conviction are also about things hoped for and things not seen. We can't see God and we can't see the future. We don't know how things will turn out. We don't have guarantees.

So then, the first thing to understand about faith is that it is all about **trust**. Trust always involves an element of the unknown. There is always an element of doubt and uncertainty even if we also have strong assurance and conviction. The miracle, in fact, is that we have such confidence even if any number of things can go wrong as they often do. To trust that God is there for us and will be there for us, that some blessing will come through our trust no matter what the outcome... this is why Jesus says repeatedly in the gospels that we need to ask God for such faith. It is a gift to believe, to trust in God like that.

But trust also includes other things. Things that are not easy to live. Trust includes **openness**. Too often we have a very narrow hope or expectation of an outcome. I pray for a specific result and if that result doesn't come my prayer has not been answered and my trust in God fails. Openness means that I allow space for a different outcome. And with a different outcome maybe a different way of seeing life and all its blessings may be gained. Unless I am open to this, blessing will definitely not come. But if my trust in God's blessing is open to new possibilities I cannot imagine from what I am going through right now, then all kinds of blessings may come my way.

How many of you have ever started your praying and believing through a particular experience that was difficult, where many a day and night you felt overwhelmed, despairing, frustrated... but now as you look back you can see how much that is important and sacred in your life today is connected to what happened then? Just because we and so many around us carry many a deep wound, doesn't mean God can't work miracles in our lives if we trust God and remain open to God's blessing even if it requires some time before we taste some of its fruit.

And this leads to a further point. To trust God and then to be open to God also requires that I learn by faith to **let go and let be**. When trouble comes, when uncertainty comes, when our stress and worry goes up, when we feel unstable and out of control, our instinct is to make things happen our way, to control the outcome, to plan this and plan that. The problem is that when we are anxious or in crisis, our horizons of possibility narrow considerably. We cannot have the kind of perspective and openness to trust that God may open doors we cannot possibly imagine. The exercise of learning to let go and let be in God, of trusting God, of being open to God's vision for us... all this is so profoundly essential to living a rich spiritual life that can bring all kinds of blessings to us and through us to the people around us. To cultivate this kind of faith and this way of living is of the highest priority if we want to live life fully and completely as children of God however long we have our lives to live them. To live life with conviction and assurance even if we cannot see the future or God, that is the kind of practice the scriptures invite us to cultivate daily. Through each new situation that comes into our lives, through each new challenge or opportunity, how will we walk it and face it as people of faith?

2) But this brings me to a second element of faith. **We walk the journey of faith as individuals but we also walk it in relationship to others.** What kinds of relationships do we cultivate and what do the kinds of relationships we cultivate reveal about our relationship with ourselves and God? Let us reflect on our gospel reading for some insight here.

Jesus heals a man, but even though the man is the recipient of profound physical and spiritual healing, the catalyst for the healing has to do with the man's friends who bring him to Jesus. We are told that 'when Jesus saw **their** faith,' he addressed the paralytic with forgiveness and healing. What kind of faith is it that they had? What is it that Jesus saw? On one level it was their faith in Jesus' ability to heal that spurred them to bring their friend and go to great lengths to get him in to see Jesus. Their faith had to do with commitment. To believe in someone is to be invested and committed to them. And more. To be committed to someone and invested in their welfare also means that I am devoted and loyal to them.

To be loyal to someone does not mean that I defend them and make excuses for them when they're on the wrong side of justice or they need to be admonished or challenged. No. That's a false understanding of loyalty. Rather, to be loyal, devoted, committed and invested in someone is to believe in their worth, in who they are. Even if others may malign them, undermine their credibility or distort their character, we choose to trust the person we know and commit to giving back as we have received. To have the kinds of relationships that are so deeply invested, committed, loyal and devoted is what builds a fortress of spiritual, emotional and practical support for us when we have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death.

Do we have those kinds of relationships in our lives? Do we have people who are devoted to our welfare and will walk beside us through thick and thin? Do we have people who will believe in us even if the rest of the world will turn on us, malign our character or make us out to be something other than we are because we are imperfect or flawed like anyone else?

Here's the problem. Some people can't cultivate such relationships because they are too self-serving. If my commitment to you is going to cost me time and money and my own reputation or criticism, I am not willing to go that far. You're on your own. But will anyone stand up and be counted for me when I'm on my own?

But let's go deeper still. **Maybe my inability to cultivate deep commitments with others stems from my lack of feeling worthy of being loved and cherished in that kind of committed way myself. Maybe I don't truly believe deep down I'm worthy of that kind of loyalty, devotion, commitment and investment because I see myself as undeserving, or too deeply flawed to be so loved.** I cannot commit to others because I don't believe anyone is so deserving of such commitment beginning with me.

What Jesus declares to this man when he sees the kind of devotion and loyalty of his friends' faith is this: your sin is forgiven. What does this mean? When we are broken down by trouble we can feel inadequate, unworthy and the faith we are unable to cultivate in God and in others can have roots in a broken faith in myself and my worthiness of being loved infinitely by God. Jesus forgives the man without demanding that he go to the temple to give a sacrifice or do something else to earn that kind of forgiving love. That's why the authorities are upset with Jesus. He is undermining their whole religious system which obliges people by holding their worth on the line. But Jesus sees that our physical and mental illness is so intertwined with our sense of worth and whether we think we deserve that others love us and believe in us for who we are.

By forgiving the man, Jesus liberates him and empowers him to believe in himself as God believes in him and his friends believe in him. His faith has begun the journey of making him well no matter what other future health, relational or financial challenges he will have to face. Jesus forgives him without conditions. **However flawed and inadequate he may feel and whatever mistakes he has made, God is committed and loyal to him and will be there for him even through the valley of the shadow of death. Will he believe that?**

And this brings it back to us. Faith is about trust, which is also about openness, which is also about learning to let go and let be in God... But faith is also about relationships... relationships with ourselves and others, ourselves and God. For healing to happen in whatever form it happens, we need to learn deeper commitment, loyalty, investment and devotion... and the more we learn to do this in relation to others, the more we will be liberated and empowered to experience it for ourselves. And the more we are liberated and empowered to experience it for ourselves, the more we will discover God as the ground of our being seeking to heal us and bless us by making us a blessing on the world around us no matter what limitations we must live today and tomorrow.

And so, the question we are left with in the end is this: Will we take the time and make the effort to cultivate this kind of faith in God? Will we continue to open ourselves to experience new conviction and assurance within? Will we continue to evaluate the quality of our commitments in our relationships? Will we ask ourselves whether we believe we are worthy of God's infinite devotion, loyalty and love even though we are flawed and broken by life like many others? **You don't have to be some hero to have a strong faith in God. You have to be willing to talk to God in all honesty and trust that God will talk back to you in some way because God is committed to you now and for eternity, no matter what. Do you believe that?** "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24) Amen.