

Faith: Complex, Challenging, and yet a Cornerstone

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Whenever I get the opportunity to speak during worship, I always feel that one of the best ways to prepare is to read and reflect on the Revised Common Lectionary, even if the passages are not my favorite—or even more challenging, if they don't speak to me or leave me confused. Well, welcome to my world of the lectionary on September 10, 2023.

Will you pray with me?

Heavenly father, I pray that you will bring some clarity to the complexities of today's readings. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts bring your meaning and message to each of us who are gathered here and on Zoom today.

First, I am totally unqualified to be here speaking to you about biblical lessons on faith, especially in the context of our readings today. But you know what? Like many of you, I have a perspective on faith that is personal to me. I'd like to explore this complex, multifaceted cornerstone of our Christian beliefs together this morning as we travel our way through Exodus, Psalm 149, Paul's letter to the Romans, and then on to Matthew. Finally, I'd like to tie it all together with a musical statement of faith.

Let's start with a definition of faith in a religious context. Generally, faith refers to a strong belief or trust in God without the need for empirical evidence or proof. It often involves a deep conviction. So this is an interesting starting point—deep conviction with no empirical evidence or proof. Here we go!

Let's begin with words from Exodus 12. Let me set the context. The Israelites have been in the bondage of slavery to the Egyptians for years. God spoke to Moses and Aaron and commanded them to prepare a special feast, with specific details about the meal and particularly about the lamb to be eaten. It was a feast that would become the Jewish feast of Passover. While this feast was to praise God for his never-ending support for them while in captivity, it also came with a horrific infliction on the Egyptians: All their firstborn children would be killed by God and the Israelites' homes would be "passed over." Many scholars over the years have suggested that the Passover meal foreshadowed the Last Supper and that Jesus was the sacrificial lamb, and this is how the Passover is fulfilled in the New Testament. We Christians believe that the events in the Old Testament were a foreshadowing of Jesus. But how do we reconcile God's wrath on Egyptian babies with our thoughts of a loving God who sent us his Son?

Again, the context. For many years, Pharaoh had refused to release the Israelites from slavery despite God unleashing numerous plagues on the Egyptians. The Passover event was God's admonition that he was not a vengeful God, but a faithful God to the Israelites who had kept their

faith in him during the years of slavery. Faith in God requires patience and takes on a new dimension when we view seemingly unreconcilable events. How does your faith hold up when there appears to be no end in sight?

Moving on to Psalm 149, we have words again from the Old Testament that will test our understanding of our faith in a loving God. The first part of the Psalm features singing, praising, rejoicing, and dancing while the second part speaks to having two-edged swords with which to execute vengeance and punishment on the nations. This Psalm calls to mind the saying from World War 2, “Praise God and pass the ammunition!” How do we reconcile these two concepts? I’m sure we can identify with the praise part. So many times in worship, through music, prayer and words spoken, we are uplifted. We leave worship with a smile on our face. But leaving with a two-edged sword to execute punishment? Okay, where do we go with this? So many times, in the Old Testament we must view stories in context. Just as in the Passover story from Exodus, we are in a time of perpetual conflict. It is speculated that King David may have written this Psalm after taking over the stronghold of Zion. Whatever the actual genesis, many scholars interpret the phrase *two-edged swords* to represent the idea that Christians must use all means possible to establish the coming Messiah’s kingdom. Many feel that it is a metaphorical reference, and that through our praise and worship of God, we are equipped with spiritual strength and guidance to carry out God’s mission. I would guess that most of us worshipping this morning would share that thought.

Unfortunately, over the decades, words like this have also been used to justify such atrocities as the crusades in the name of religion. The danger is finding words in scripture that support our view and interpretation, without thoughtfully considering the context and the writer’s intent.

For the moment, let’s put our swords back in our sheaths and think a little more peacefully about our “weapons.” What are the gifts that God has given specifically to you that you use or could use to carry out the mission of Jesus? Do you have the faith and trust in God that he will support you even in the most challenging times? King David, after confessing his personal failings, found a renewed faith and trust in God and then went on to become one of Israel’s greatest rulers. We too can accomplish great things when we put our trust in God.

Let’s move on to the New Testament and the passage from Romans. Paul writes that love is the centrality of Christian life. He cites some of the Ten Commandments, but then he summarizes: “Whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.” Paul concludes by saying, “Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.” So here we are left for each of us to define for ourselves what clothes of Jesus we will put on, clothes that will do no harm to our neighbor and fulfill the law with love. This got me reflecting on the various denominations in the Christian faith and the “clothes” that they/we choose to wear in our pursuit of neighborly love. Most denominations share many common loving attributes—care for the needy, responding to disasters, etc. But often when it comes to doctrinal issues, there are deep divisions about what clothes are in our closets and when and where we wear them.

I'll share a story with you as an example of this. I grew up Roman Catholic, and I was a faithful young person in the Catholic Church. I attended Catholic schools from kindergarten to senior year in high school. Mass every Sunday, no meat on Friday, and so on. During my college years, I drifted away from the church, but I never completely divorced myself from the idea of a faith in God. I finally returned to organized religion in 1982 when Carol and I joined a UCC church in Norwell, MA, pastored by Dave Norling. Fast forward to recent times. I was speaking at a seminar at St. Thomas University in Minneapolis and ended up going out to dinner with five staff members from the school who were all practicing Catholics. Somehow, we got into a discussion of Holy Communion, and I reflected on how much I love the open table of Christ—and to this day, if I am in a Catholic service, I will take communion. Well, they did not agree, but we had a good conversation about traditions and respect for the rules of organizations. It was one of those times when we could agree to disagree and part with mutual respect for the conversation. Too often this kind of conversation is left at the doorstep instead of being part of a dialogue that broadens and strengthens the whole body of Christ.

How does your faith inform you about what clothes you should have in your closet and what and when to wear them?

And then in Matthew 18, we read that the spiritual presence of Christ is with us even among a small gathering of believers who come together in his name. This provides a framework for addressing conflicts and seeking resolution in a manner that reflects the values of grace, restoration, and unity. Yet, years ago, in my home church in Massachusetts, we endured a divisive time during a transition of pastoral leadership that made me ask where is God in all of this? I had never experienced conflict in a church environment, since in the Catholic Church, the Bishop made pastoral decisions and the congregation just went along with it. Friends were distancing themselves from each other, and many left the church. It severely tested my faith and my belief that God, through his son Jesus, is central in all that we do. However, slowly but surely, as many of us remained committed to each other and faithful to what we heard as God's call, we rebuilt, and as the saying goes, became stronger than ever. But without our individual and collective faith in God, it would not have happened.

Sometimes, even in my personal life, I know that I don't address conflict in a manner that reflects the values of grace. What clothes of Christ are you wearing? How does your faith inform you when you address conflict?

As my message title suggests, faith is complex and challenging, yet a cornerstone of our spirituality. Sometimes we question our faith, and sometimes we bathe in its possibilities. Sometimes we are struck by something that speaks to our heart and touches a chord that resonates in very deep ways that make all the questions melt away in a warm bath of grace. I'd like to share one of those with you this morning.

Every year, Covid time excluded, my home church in Massachusetts offers a Christmas concert to the community. We usually have two or three concerts during the first weekend in December, with each concert drawing an audience of about four hundred people. The concert features many new choral arrangements, musicians, handbells, and solos. This past year, we learned a new song titled “When God’s Time Had Ripened,” and the words jumped off the page at me. I felt that the essence of my Christian faith was right there in the words and notes. Singer and songwriter Jenn Johnson once said, “If you sing something that you believe with all your heart, people will feel it’s contagious.” This is how this song resonated with me.

Printed in your bulletin are some of the words from that song. I want to read those to you this morning in a reflective way, and then I will end with the full song as sung by the UCC Norwell choir at our 2022 Christmas concert.

Amen.