

This is the last in my sermon series on Spiritual Literacy, we made it to F!

I may work my way up to the letters G through Z at a later date.

Today we are dealing with a component of spirituality that is so obvious that it might seem unnecessary to even mention.

Nevertheless, it is important to occasionally examine those things we take for granted, to consider exactly what we mean when we speak of faith.

Faith is defined as fidelity to one’s promises, loyalty, and trust.

It is also defined as a firm belief in something for which there is no proof, belief in invisible things that are not supported by logic, evidence or reason.

Faith is a nebulous and vague concept to so many people.

Those of us who have found it, and consider faith important, are fortunate indeed.

To have faith is to be grasped by a power greater than we are.

Faith sees, knows and senses the presence of God in this world.

Faith is a power that shakes us, turns us, transforms and heals us.

It is humbling to have faith, because your self importance is diminished when you realize that you are not alone in this universe, you are not the crown of creation, for there is a God, and it’s not you.

But faith is not only found in religious expression,

for even those who do not believe in God have faith in something.

You can have faith in medicine, education, the future, in the goodness and generosity of others. You can have faith in the Broncos or Rockies.

You need to have faith in yourself.

Some noted philosophers and theologians

have put forth the idea that faith is the basis of all knowledge.

St. Augustine wrote of "faith seeking understanding."

He wrote that human beings needed to believe first, so that they might understand.

This was considered one of his key contributions to philosophy.

This statement extends beyond the sphere of religion to encompass the totality of knowledge. In essence, faith must be present in order to know anything at all.

In other words, one must assume, believe, or have faith in the credibility of an idea in order to have a basis for knowledge.

Faith in something, is the fundamental basis of all human knowledge.

Faith in God, is the fundamental basis of ultimate meaning in human life.

But fewer and fewer people are looking to Christianity as the source of faith.

In a recently published book called *Un-Christian*, the authors examine the perceptions of the general public toward the Christian faith, particularly among 16 to 29 year olds in America.

They found that most of them consider Christians to be insensitive, judgmental, and hypocritical. Fewer and fewer of that generation are seeking spiritual nourishment through Christianity, because they consider it irrelevant to their lives.

An entire generation is seeking spiritual nourishment elsewhere, primarily because of the offensive behavior of believers.

But even for those who are practicing Christians, faith does not always come easily.

Faith in God is not something that you are given once and for all, and never have to think about or reconsider ever again.

The journey of faith has low points, pitfalls and detours for all of us.

Mike Yaconelli was the founder of Youth Specialties.

He spent 43 years in ministry to youth, and 20 years as a pastor of a small church in Yreka, California. He called his church "the slowest growing church in America."

Yaconelli wrote a book called *Messy Spirituality*, in which he describes the journey of faith as one which never moves progressively in a straight line.

It is a journey which starts and stops, zigs and zags, goes up and down and gets lost.

The journey of faith is never from here to there.

It is a journey that changes over time, as you mature and grow,
But it is not linear, nor is it perfect.

Which describes the tumultuous faith journey of
Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Surely there is no person in the last century who more perfectly embodied the heart and soul of Christianity like she did.

And yet she had profound struggles with her faith.

In a book of her newly published letters by Brian Kolodiejchik,

Come Be My Light, this amazing woman shared that her last 50 years were filled with deep doubts and despair.

"If there be God," she wrote, "please forgive me.

When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness

that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul.

How painful is this unknown—I have no faith.”

While those revelations depressed me initially, I have come to see the beauty in her authentic search and longing for God. Even though she had profound inner struggles with her faith, Mother Teresa continued to act in faith.

God used her, in spite of her deep doubts.

That is a powerful example for us.

Even in her darkest night of the soul, she did not abandon her work and live a life of self-indulgence and pettiness.

She did not give up her work with the Missionaries of Charity, but kept on going through the darkness and despair.

That is the best any of us can do.

You act in faith, put one foot in front of the other, and pray that your faith will increase.

Faith is not correct belief, but sincere relationship.

Faith is not only hoping and trusting, but acting.

Acting, even when you don't really feel like it at all.

While Jesus delivered people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, wounds, deformity and muteness, he repeatedly asked if they believed he could do it.

Our text today from Matthew is a good example.

Two blind men followed him, crying out for him to have mercy on them.

Jesus asks them, “Do you believe I can heal you?”

“Yes,” they shout, “..of course.”

He touched their eyes and said, according to the Message,

“Become what you believe.”

Become what you believe, we all do eventually.

“Do you believe I can heal you?” It is a question for all of us.

Of course, the most challenging dilemma for people of faith is human suffering.

How can God be all good and all loving, when there is so much unnecessary tragedy and heartache in this world?

And why do so many good people who have faith in God, suffer so much?

Of course, it is the wrong question because everyone suffers so much, people with great faith and no faith at all.

Just because you have faith does not mean life will be easy for you.

Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person of faith, is like expecting the bull not to charge you because you are a vegetarian.

The evidence suggests that this is a tragic world, full of suffering and tragedy and pain. But we believe in God anyway. We act in faith anyway.

We will have days of doubt and despair, but we keep trying anyway.

We trust in God's goodness, mercy, and grace, and know that when any one of us suffers, God suffers too.

"Faith is acting in spite of the evidence, and watching the evidence change."

And the evidence does change when you act in faith.

Things change and you change when you align yourself with what God is doing in this world, when you try to be a blessing and stop whining.

At the heart of Christianity is a belief that our struggles are somehow redemptive.

They have the power to shape us, strengthens us, and bring us new life.

Jesus showed us that sorrow is not the final word. The final word is hope.

Without faith our suffering would be utterly meaningless and unbearable.

To be a person of faith does not require that you are correct in what you believe, flawless in your behavior, perfect in prayer.

Christianity is for very imperfect people who are willing to allow God to work with them and within them.

People who see their messy lives and messy spirituality as God's opportunity to change the world.

And whether our faith is weak or strong, God continues to have faith in us.

God continues to love us, forgive us, reach out to us.

We are God's best hope for the transformation of the world.

That is why God became one of us, so that we would finally understand God's deepest longing for humankind.

Whether we have faith in God or not, God has faith in us.

One of my favorite days in the church year is World Communion Sunday.

It is a glorious example of the global reach of Christianity.

It is a day when we remember our Christian brothers and sisters are coming to the same table, a table that cuts across all barriers of economics, nationality, race, creed, lifestyle.

They are coming to receive these symbols of our shared faith in open fields in Africa and in great Cathedrals in Europe. They are coming to tiny one room churches in Kansas, and massive mega-churches in Korea.

It is a day when we celebrate our diversity as the Body of Christ,
and our unity as people of faith.

We are so diverse, colorful and unique but share a common faith in God.

World Communion Sunday always makes me think of
Retired Bishop Roy Sano who once told about walking down the street one day in
East L.A. and discovering a food stand selling “Okie Dogs.”

He thought to himself, how charming--food from Oklahoma served right in the middle of East L.A. He stopped to order one, but thought he'd better find out exactly what they were. He received this explanation--Okie Dogs are essentially grease bombs made by residents of Okinawa and Japan, using ingredients from Germany and China. An Okie Dog is a Sauerkraut/Pastrami Oriental Burrito consumed primarily by African Americans in East L.A.

Eating an Okie Dog is a courageous act of faith.

Okie Dogs are a metaphor for our time,
representing the fascinating diversity in this world.

Something wonderful happens when a mixture of diverse forces or ingredients
come together into one.

That is what is happening on this World Communion Sunday.

Christians gather with deep faith or very little faith, unique and different.

But underneath it all we are essentially the same--precious children of God,
created in God's image. As you come forward for communion today, think of
what a gift it is that you believe in a God who believes in you.

Receive these symbols of a God who loves you so much that he gave His life,
that you might have life, abundantly and eternally.