



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JULY 5, 2015

THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
OUT OF THE MINDS OF CHILDREN: QUESTIONS OF FAITH

How Can People Always Have Faith?
Matthew 9:9-17; Galatians 5:1, 13-26

The other night, while scrolling through the various news programs, I happened to land on the show, *America's Got Talent*. I have rarely watched this program, but I have seen it enough to know that while America may have talent, not all Americans have talent—myself included! I paused long enough to see that the next contestant was a little girl five years old. She was adorable in every way. She was confident. When asked when she began singing, she promptly answered, “When I was one year old!” She was poised. She answered questions posed by the judge like a pro. She was ready to take on the world. She sang. She danced. She brought the audience to its feet. I have heard five year olds sing many times, but this girl's singing was dynamic. She had range, projection, vocal technique, and personality—lots of personality! One of the judges compared her to Shirley Temple and said, “Shirley Temple must be living inside of you. Is that possible?” To which this little girl, whose name, by the way, is Heavenly Joy, answered, “No, not Shirley Temple—Jesus!”¹

That little girl has a gift, and I hope it will last. I have known other children who, at an early age showed amazing talent, but somewhere along the way they lost interest—and neglected their talent.

When our children met with me here in the sanctuary last winter, Reynolds Cobb asked a question that reminds me of little Heavenly Joy. He asked, “How can people always have faith?” He knows that faith is a gift, but wonders how we keep it going through the years. So often our initial faith experience is vibrant and emotional. God feels close and we feel as if we can and will do anything for God. Yet, most of us know firsthand that if we don't pay attention to our faith, it loses its vibrancy and we lose our resolve to do the things God calls us to do.

Do you remember the book and movie, *The Polar Express*?² Children are able to hear the bells on the harnesses of Santa's reindeer but adults

¹America's Got Talent, NBC, June 30, 2015; available online at: <http://www.nbc.com/americas-got-talent/video/heavenly-joy/2877845>.

²Chris Van Allsburg, *The Polar Express* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985).

cannot because they have ceased to believe and thus to listen. In the same way, if we do not continue to exercise our faith in Christ Jesus, if we do not continue to believe in all that God has done and is doing in the world, then our faith will grow weaker and we will no longer listen for God to speak to us.

Reynolds knows that we exercise our faith by reading and studying the Bible, by praying, talking to other Christians, worshiping, and exploring our faith. His question, however, goes beyond the obvious to the critical: How can we *always* have faith? In other words, how can we keep our faith alive? How do we grow our faith so that it remains vibrant and resilient and engaged with our world?

Earlier we read two accounts which Matthew reports from early in Jesus' ministry. First, we heard the story of Matthew's "call" when Jesus walked by the tax booth and said, "Follow me," and Matthew did! His faith response seems simple and immediate but is followed by two accounts of faith seeking understanding. When Jesus regularly dined with people whom the Jews identified as "tax collectors and sinners," he was criticized. The Jewish faith urged holiness by remaining pure and undefiled; yet, Jesus jumped right in with people who were considered unclean. "What kind of faith associated with people who are sinners?" the Pharisees wanted to know. A little later, some of John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus why his followers did not practice fasting as they did. After all, scripture advised fasting as a helpful spiritual discipline and God had insisted on fast long ago during their wilderness wanderings. Jesus reminded both groups of God's original intent that life is a celebration and to be enjoyed by all people. He offered an unforgettable insight. He said, "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved" (Matthew 9: 16-17).

Jesus point was that a seamstress and a winemaker both know that something new and fresh cannot be contained in something that is old and inflexible. Faith must be constantly growing, stretching, and maturing in order to accommodate a growing, changing world.

My faith is not the same today as it was years ago when I was Reynold's age. I do not believe in the same way I did 38 years ago when I entered college and honestly confronted my faith for the first time. I do not understand God in the same ways that I did 30 years ago when I accepted my

first ministry position in Savannah. My faith is not the same as it was 22 years ago when I became a pastor in Warrenton. Without a doubt, my faith has grown since I became your pastor seventeen years ago. I can also say that I know firsthand that for many of you, your faith has changed in the years I have known you.

That is how it should be. As amazing as it is at five years of age, I would hope that Heavenly Joy's talent will continue to develop as she grows up. There will be teachers and fans and friends who will guide her to mature her talent in many ways. In the same way, our faith must grow and change in order for us to grow in relationship with God and to fulfill God's calling in our lives. Teachers, ministers, family, and friends eagerly await the opportunity to help shape our faith.

Faith is dynamic. It grows. It explores. It changes. It matures. To assist that process, like the people around Jesus, we have to ask questions, entertain new possibilities, take risks, and follow the Spirit of God as we mature in faith.

One thing is certain. Faith can best flourish in an atmosphere of freedom where our questions are not ridiculed, our doubts are not dismissed, and our attempts to live out our faith are not suppressed.

The Apostle Paul strongly reminded his friends in Galatia that freedom of faith is critical. "For freedom Christ has set us free," he said. "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery . . . For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence" (Galatians 5:1, 13). Paul had grown up in the strictures of Jewish orthodoxy and had participated in the abuse that religion can sometimes bring. As we know, Paul had taken upon himself the task of eliminating all followers of Jesus. When he met Christ himself, his faith changed. He did not lose the faith he had inherited from his Jewish ancestors, but he allowed God to change his mind and his heart about what God was doing in the world. A major aspect of Jesus' ministry was calling people to allow their faith to see the world and God in different ways. That is the faith which has been passed down to us.

We are fortunate to live in a nation which values freedom of faith. Maintaining this freedom is often challenging, but thank God we do not live in a country where government can dictate what we can or cannot believe. Many of the people who first settled this land came here seeking a place

where they could practice their faith without restriction. Granted, we do not necessarily understand our faith in the same way that they did, but it proves that their bold move of faith was right. They led the way for us to explore faith as God leads us, and we are grateful.

This freedom, freedom for which so many have dedicated and sacrificed their lives, is not a license to impose our beliefs on others or to use our faith for self-gain. Paul warned that freedom is not given us by God for our self-indulgence. Freedom comes with responsibility. That is why Paul offers a list of things that will inhibit faith as well as a list of things that will enable faith to flourish. Does it not make sense that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are the fruits of faith in God? Are they not the characteristics we should cultivate rather than fornication, impurity, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, factions, and envy, to name a few items on Paul's list?

Faith frees us. It does not bind us. It opens us up to all of the possibilities God might have for us to act out his love in the world. So to exercise our faith, to guarantee that we do not lose faith, we must promote the freedom for all people to practice faith. And we must use our faith, exercising it daily so that it does not wither in the heat of difficult times. We must cultivate our faith so that it is strong and healthy and will not succumb to false teachings. We must challenge our faith so that it will be resilient to the challenges of life.

God in Christ has offered to us the freedom of faith. It is a gift not to be neglected or wasted or used as weapon against one another. It is a gift designed to bring goodness and beauty to the world which God created for our benefit and enjoyment. The essence of faith, as Reynolds and his friends and, I hope, all of us are learning is that Jesus is living in us, prompting us to use our talents in the service of God and all people. That, I believe, is "heavenly joy" and earthly bliss. Amen.

July 5, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

There is so much for which we are thankful today, O God. We are grateful for family and friends who bring joy to our lives and offer support day by day. We are thankful for our nation and the freedom upon which it was founded. We are thankful for everyone who has invested his or her life into making our country a land of opportunity for all people. And we are thankful for every blessing you have bestowed upon our country and her people.

We know that with our freedom comes great responsibility and we are keenly aware of our needs. We pray that you will help us to fulfill your desire of a homeland wherein all people are treated as equal and valued for the gifts you have so freely given us. We pray that we will once again provide strong education and meaningful careers for our children. We pray that all of our brothers and sisters will have housing that is safe, food that is nutritious, families that are loving, and communities that are strong. Grant us these things, we ask, and remind us that we are a part of the answer to every prayer we make.

Above all, O God, we pray for a sense of unity here in our own community. Our personal interests and ancient prejudices are pushing us apart. Open our eyes and our hearts to the blessings which we share together. Unify us to do what is right and good for all, working together for the best interests of our children, and recognizing that the best resources are already here among us.

We pray for peace across the world, O God. As a nation weary from wars that are not even our own, use us as a herald of peace. Lead us to effective ways to put a stop to terror at home and abroad. Guide us in our friendship with other nations that we will be a friend in time of need and a faithful ally in moments of threat. Summon all of your people to ban together for the common good and save us from our own evil, we pray.

We pray for ourselves, O God, not selfishly but with self awareness of the individual needs we have. Whether illness, grief, unemployment, or community tensions bear down upon us, we know that you desire wholeness of life for all people. Bolster us with a steady and resilient faith which we eagerly share with others in action and in word; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.