

Sermon for Zion, November 1, 2020 – Reformation Sunday
Hymns: 315 – A Mighty Fortress; 612 – Christ is the King;
626 – Lord of all power
Scriptures: John 3:16-18a; Romans 10:9-10; James 2:14-20
Sermon Title: “Belief, Trust, Action”

John 3:16-18a (CEV)

God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them! No one who has faith in God’s Son will be condemned.

Romans 10:9-10 (NLT)

If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved.

James 2:14-17; 18-20 (NLT)

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

Now someone may argue, “Some people have faith; others have good deeds.” But I say, “How can you show me your faith if you don’t have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.”

You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can’t you see that faith without good deeds is useless?

We are people of faith. We are adherents of the Christian Faith, in particular, professing that which is revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments: that God, the Creator of all, has reached out to us in love and grace, with forgiveness and salvation, through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is through faith in Jesus Christ that we receive the gifts of forgiveness, salvation and new life. We have faith that through the Holy Spirit, God continues to be present in our lives, assuring us of God’s presence and care,

and inspiring us to do the work of bringing the Kingdom of God to realisation in our world. We have faith that when our time in this world has come to an end, we too shall one day be resurrected, to continue in eternity with God.

That is the Christian Faith, as concisely as I can manage to put it. When we call ourselves Christians, this is what we are saying we believe. The Bible seldom calls it “the Christian Faith;” the word “Christian” is a nickname which arose in Antioch, and was only widely applied to the followers of Jesus a bit later. Mostly, the New Testament just says, “The Faith.” As in this letter of Paul (1 Corinthians 16:13): *“Be on your guard; stand firm in **the faith**; be courageous; be strong.”* Or this, from the Early Church’s biographer, Luke (Acts 6:7) *“So the word of God spread, and a large number... became obedient to **the faith**.”*

So that’s **what** “The Faith” is. But what does it mean to **have** faith? For all that matters, what does “faith” even mean? Five hundred years ago, the rallying cry of the Reformation, which we remember this Reformation Sunday, was that salvation is by faith alone, in Christ alone, through God’s grace alone, revealed in the Scriptures alone, to the Glory of God alone – the so-called Five Solas. As Presbyterians, we are a Reformation church, a descendent of that 500-year-old revolution. If we are to continue to be a Reformation people, we better understand what “faith” means.

And it may surprise you that the word “Faith” in the Christian context does not mean just one thing, but three things: Faith is Belief, Faith is Trust, and Faith is Action.

First then, Faith is Belief. In fact, in the New Testament, the words “Faith” and “Belief” are often used interchangeably – they come from the same root word in the language in which the New Testament was written. Depending upon which translation you happen to be using, the same verse which in one says “Faith,” may in another say “Believe.”

When the Bible talks about believing in Jesus, though, it is talking about more than simply believing that someone named Jesus lived in the land of Israel a couple thousand years ago, in the same way we might believe in the existence of Sir John A. MacDonald, say, or Julius Caesar. After all, simply believing in the mere existence of Jesus doesn’t make you a Christian, any more than believing in the existence of John A. MacDonald makes you a Tory (or, in many eyes these days, a bigot), or that believing in the existence of Julius Caesar makes you a Roman.

When the Bible talks about believing in Jesus, it means believing that Jesus is who Jesus said he was, and is who he was revealed to be. I'll let the Bible itself demonstrate what I mean:

John 6:68-70 - Simon Peter answered Jesus, "We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

John 11:25-27 - Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

Romans 10:9-10 - If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

John 20:31 - But these words are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Notice that in each of these examples – and there are many more – belief in Jesus means more than acknowledging the fact of his existence. It means believing something very specific about Jesus – that he is the Holy One of God, the Messiah, the Resurrected Lord and Saviour, the very Son of God.

But faith means more than that. Again, acknowledging that John MacDonald was the first Prime Minister of Canada doesn't make you a Canadian (or a bigot); it is simply a recognition of his historical position. It is a fact, and recognising it as a fact doesn't grant you citizenship. In the same way, it may surprise you to know that acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God doesn't make you a Christian, or grant you citizenship, as it were, in the Kingdom of God. Acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God is an important first step, but there's more. Because **faith means more than belief**. Jesus' brother James makes this very clear in a rather shocking statement in his letter which we find in the New Testament. He says, in a rare bit of New Testament sarcasm we read earlier, "*You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror.*" Faith means more than belief, says James. Faith also means Trust.

Faith as Trust means not only to believe who Jesus was, but to place your trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. It means to give your allegiance to him, to place

your life in his hands. After all, it is one thing to call Jesus Lord – to believe that he is who he and others said he is. It is another thing altogether to trust him as Lord. As Your Lord.

To call Jesus “Lord” is to do several things. First of all, it is to acknowledge who Jesus is – the Lord Jesus Christ, God among us. Not just the historical figure of a prophet in long-ago Israel, not just a good man, not just a profound teacher, but, in fact, Lord. The Lord. The Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God. It is an acknowledgement. It is a declaration: “He Is Lord.” He is not just one among many good moral teachers; he is not just one among many religious figures, on a par with the Buddha or Mohammed or the Dalai Lama; he is Lord. The Lord.

The second and perhaps more important thing we are doing when we call Jesus “Lord” is that we are declaring a relationship. We say “The Lord,” but we also say “Our Lord.” We say, “My Lord.” There’s a big difference between saying “the Lord” and “my Lord.” “The” implies a recognition of Jesus’ status. “Our” and “My” declares that status as impacting us. When we say “Our Lord” or “My Lord,” we are acknowledging that we are in relationship with Jesus as our Lord. We are placing our trust in him.

Let me explain. I have a way for the husbands among us to try this out (I have done this before, so fellows, if you’re getting nervous, you know why): Next time you are at a social function of some kind, introduce your wife as “The Wife.” Not, “my wife,” or “Brenda,” or whatever (particularly if her name isn’t Brenda. That’s a whole other sinkhole you want to avoid). Call her, “The Wife.” As in, “This is The Wife.” See how your wife likes that. Try it right now! Now, think about why this is not going over big with The Little Woman; rather than declaring your relationship with her, as in “my wife,” you are instead simply acknowledging, at arm’s length, her title, her situation, her role. What’s happening is that you are, in fact, putting her at a distance. She’s becoming an object, not a person. Don’t believe me? Like I said, try it. And good luck to you.

In contrast, referring to our spouse as “my wife” or “my husband” declares the relationship we have with them. Calling Jesus “my Lord,” or “our Lord,” declares the relationship we have with Jesus. Jesus is not just “the Lord,” but is “my Lord.” This is our most fundamental distinguishing characteristic as Christians. Since the inception of the church, this is what has defined us: a Christian is one who enters into relationship with Jesus Christ. Not just one who acknowledges who Jesus is, but one who enters into relationship with, who places their trust in, Jesus as Lord.

Back to the marriage analogy: When you say “The Wife,” you are saying there is a legal relationship between the two of you. When you say “My Wife,” you are saying that this is a person who is in your heart, someone with whom you set your priorities, someone with whom you share your life. Same with “The Lord, My Lord.” When you say “My Lord,” you are saying that Jesus is the Lord to whom you have opened your heart; with whom you set your priorities, with whom you share your life. Because faith is more than belief. It is Relationship. It is Trust.

But faith is more than even that. Listen again to the words of Jesus:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46)

Faith is belief. Faith is trust. And faith, says Jesus, is belief and trust put into action! It is the acting in faith, the living out of that relationship of trust, that makes our faith complete. That’s what makes us Christian. That’s what makes Jesus “Lord.” That’s what James is getting at when he writes (James 2:14-20 NLT):

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

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Acknowledging the title alone, argues James, is largely meaningless. “*Our faith,*” he writes, “*is made complete by our actions*” (James 2:22). To call Jesus “Lord” ***and mean it***, means to call Jesus “Lord” ***and live it***. And that means, quite simply, giving Jesus priority in our lives. It means, making what Jesus wants for

us and for others a priority. Our priority. Giving Jesus priority in our lives is what calling Jesus “Lord” really means. It is the whole point. It is everything. It is what Christianity is all about. Calling Jesus Lord, but leaving him out of our day-to-day decisions, out of our day-to-day life, is just lip-service.

Like, for instance, involving our faith in our decisions. If we are giving Jesus priority, I expect there will be a significant shift in the way we make use of our energies, our time, our resources. Into what are we putting our energies? How are we spending our time? What gets priority when it comes to how we make use of our finances? If we incorporate Jesus and his teaching into these decisions, how would they be affected? Would we give to God the best of our energy, our time, our resources, our just what happens to be left over, just what we wouldn’t miss? To put it as straightforward as possible, to what degree is Jesus really “My Lord?” Do our belief, our trust and our actions fit together? Is our faith partial, fragmented? Or is it complete?

Martin Luther, whose discovery of the true meaning of faith sparked the Reformation, put it this way:

Faith is a living, bold trust in God’s grace, so certain of God’s favour that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God’s grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire!

When we stumble in our faith, remember that the God in whom we place our faith is faithful, and will give us strength, helping us to follow as good and faithful people. “That is why,” writes Paul, “we always pray for you, asking our God to help you live the kind of life he called you to live. We pray that with his power God will help you desire the good, and perform the works that come from your faith” (2 Thessalonians 1:11).

Belief, trust, action. This is the faith we profess, the faith we have in Jesus as Lord, the faith by which we live. Sola Fide. By Faith Alone. Thanks be to God! Amen.