

Faith: It's More About Trust Than Beliefs

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1

Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16 Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6
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I've said it before, and I will say it again and again and again: some elements of modern Christianity are really messed up. And perhaps no more so than how many folks understand the concept of faith. The truth of the matter is that a majority of Christians, perhaps ourselves, have a difficult time trying to define our understanding of faith. But many have tried. For instance, here's a wonderful quote from Presbyterian author **Fredrick Buechner**: "Faith is better understood as a verb, than a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again/off-again rather than once and for all. Faith is not being sure of where you're going, but going anyway. A journey without maps."

This is certainly an apt characterization of the faith of Abraham and Sarah, as we heard in both our Old Testament and New Testament Epistle readings this morning. I would suspect that faith, for most of us, is something more we *experience* than something we can *describe*. The Bible, too, uses the stories of peoples' lives to *illustrate* what faith is. Again, like the life of Abraham and Sarah.

Chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews, however, begins with a classic definition of faith, perhaps the most famous passage in this book, whose author is unknown, "**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**" (NRSV) Though we might debate what this statement actually means, it seems clear that according to the author of Hebrews **faith and hope are inseparably linked**. Think about this in relationship to how you understand your faith. Doesn't your faith include the element of hope? **The opposite of faith, then, is not doubt but hopelessness.**

The professional journal called *The Living Pulpit*, published an article in 2000 by **Douglas John Hall**, Professor of Christian Theology at McGill University in Montreal. It's entitled, "**Faith: Response in Relationship**," Hall begins with perhaps the best approach – clearing up what faith is *not*. He writes:

When it comes to defining something as elusive and misunderstood as faith, perhaps the way to begin is to say what it is *not*. There are at least three fundamental misconceptions of faith at work in our society. If we can identify them, it will leave a little space for pointing to the mystery that faith -- biblically understood -- is.

First, faith is not assent to doctrines about God, creation, Jesus Christ, etc. This does not mean that faith has nothing to do with 'beliefs' or cherished 'truths' of

the tradition; it has. But faith isn't to be equated with giving credence to these teachings.

Second, faith is not accepting 'on authority' (the authority of the church, the tradition, the Bible, parents, preachers and teachers, etc.) **what one cannot personally experience** or feel to be true. There is a necessary personal dimension in faith; you have to 'do it yourself.'

To put it another way, other people can *share* their faith with you, but they can't give you faith. Most people realize this after they come to a point when they question what they have been taught or told to believe as children and youth, or even as adults. The end result is it becomes *your* faith, not the faith of your parents or pastors or even the faith of your religious tradition.

Third, faith is not a vague spirituality... In reaction against the sort of faith referred to in the first two misunderstandings, 'modern' forms of Christianity often foster the notion that faith is chiefly an emotion [like elements in the Pentecostal tradition, among others], or a positive outlook [like Robert Schuller, Joel Osteen, among others], or a readiness to 'believe.'

In case this is already getting a bit confusing, let me recap Hall's understanding of what faith is *not*.

- First, faith is not simply giving our intellectual assent to specific theological doctrines and beliefs.
- Second, faith is not accepting "on authority" what others tell you to believe. Instead, there must be a personal experiential dimension in faith.
- Third, faith is not chiefly an emotion, or a positive attitude, or an over-emphasis in simply being a believing person that has no connection to how we actually live our lives in an ethical way.

Along these lines, I discovered a new book just this very week that may help in this regard. It's by **Peter Enns**, professor of biblical studies at Eastern University in Philadelphia, a fairly conservative evangelical Christian school. So, I was shocked at the title, ***The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our "Correct" Beliefs.*** Progressives have been saying that forever. Enns argues that **certainty (especially theological certainty) is inappropriate, dangerous and unbiblical.** He separates what never should have been mistaken as the same thing: faith and "correct" beliefs. He writes:

When did being "right" with God come to mean believing the right things about God—believing the right doctrines, reading the Bible the right way, holding the right views?

For many Christians, this idea is at the very center of their religious lives. And that's a problem. Because this focus on being correct can actually distract us from faith and from God.

What happens when the security of “knowing what you believe” gets disrupted—as it does sooner or later? What if once-settled questions—like “What is God really like?”—suddenly become unsettled?

Enns also states, “A faith that promises to provide firm answers and relieve our doubt is a faith that will not hold up to the challenges and tragedies of life. Only deep trust can hold up.” As many of us have experienced, **the sense of being certain always and inevitably leads to being judgmental, even to the point of condemning others who don’t believe the same thing.** Enns encapsulates it this way:

It is so easy to slip into “right thinking” mode — that we have arrived at full faith. We know what church God goes to, what Bible translation God prefers, how God votes, what movies God watches, and what books God reads. We know the kinds of people God approves of.

God has winners and losers, and we are the winners, the true insiders. God likes all the things we like. We speak for God and think nothing of it.

In relation to this attitude and approach Enns goes as far as declaring, “**A faith in a living God that is preoccupied with certainty, is sin.**” Amen to that. Before jumping to condemnation ourselves, however, you need to know that your pastor used to be in that camp. In fact, like others who have been misguided by particular teachings, **I thought God wanted or even required me to be certain in my beliefs.**

A couple of things changed that, however. The first was reality. The wilderness experience of losing my career as a petroleum geologist in the mid 1980s, along with everything that went with that, put a huge crack in the understanding of equating a life of faith with certainty in my beliefs. In particular, the belief that God causes or allows everything to happen for a reason, that it is all part of some divine plan and blueprint for my life. **I started to question whether or not everything that happens is somehow a part of God’s will.**

The other major event that led me to a new way of understanding faith as trust instead of as correct beliefs was during my first year of seminary back in 1989-90. After working with a former Jesuit during counseling sessions, and sharing my then-understanding of faith, he suggested that I “**let the mystery return.**” **Only then, he said, could I truly experience God’s grace.** At the time I found that offensive and had no idea what that meant. But I do now. And I share the same with you. When you find yourself becoming absolutely certain in your beliefs, especially about God, perhaps it would help for you to let the mystery return.

Enns helps us to see, as many of us have learned some time ago, that **letting go of certainty is not in any way a compromise to faith, but rather a demonstration of faith.**

In a brief concluding chapter of his book, Enns, who writes as a **post-evangelical** for other post-evangelicals, argues for “adopting and intentionally cultivating in Christians a culture of trust in God, rather than raising up soldiers for holy wars.” Amen. Another post-evangelical, Rachel Held Evans writes:

When you grow up believing that your religious worldview contains the key to absolute truth and provides an answer to every question, you never really get over the disappointment of learning that it doesn’t. It’s a lonely, frightening journey and most of us are limping along as best we can.

Many of us have indeed come from conservative backgrounds and have traditional if not evangelical religious worldviews of which we no longer relate. Unfortunately, many have simply left the church and organized religion altogether. But I've often referred to theologically progressive congregations within the mainline denominations as being like an "**Isle of misfit toys**," to quote an old animated Christmas classic.

It does indeed take grace, God's grace and our own, to be a community of faith more concerned with living a life of faith that concentrates on trusting and connecting with our understanding of Who God Is, rather than promoting the unbiblical sense of certainty in "correct" beliefs.

Let us beware of the sin of certainty.

Amen.