

Date: May 29, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 9

SERMON: Faith Is a Verb

Text(s): Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-26; Matthew 7:21-29

© 2005 L. R. Kalajainen

Do you remember learning the parts of speech when you were in school? I can't remember what grade it was, but it was pretty early that we learned that nouns were words that were the names of persons, places, or things, and verbs were action words, and adjectives were describing words. At some point, I think it was around 7th or 8th grade we had to begin learning to diagram sentences. I don't think English is taught that way any more, and probably a good thing. I never liked that part of English class.

The reason I didn't like it was that the teacher used to write a sentence on the blackboard, and then would call several of the class up, one at a time, and make us diagram the sentence in front of everybody else. And it seemed to me at the time that I was always one of those unfortunates who got called on. What I really hated was being up there in front of God and all my classmates who were just hoping that I'd make a complete fool of myself so they could tease me after class. I actually think I learned English grammar better in my high school Latin class.

Both of our lessons this morning present us with something of a grammar lesson in faith. Faith is a confusing word. Much of the time, it looks and acts like a noun, as though it names some thing. "Don't you have any faith?" we ask of our friend who's expressing doubt or who is discouraged, as though faith is a thing that we can either have or not have. Or in churches where the Apostles Creed or Nicene Creed are used regularly in worship, it's common for the pastor to say "Let us stand and affirm our faith in the words of the Apostles Creed." In this case too, faith seems like some thing, some body of content or doctrinal beliefs that we can either affirm or deny. We say of someone, "She seems

to have lost her faith," or, more happily, "she's rediscovered her faith." Or we might hear someone say, "I don't have any faith that Israelis and Palestinians will ever be able to live in peace." In all these instances, the word faith looks and seems to function in the sentences as a noun, as some thing.

Such an understanding of faith as a noun even gets into public policy disputes. Out in Kansas right now, as well as in several other states, school boards and legislators are involved in a war over whether the scientific consensus on evolution should be taught as a fact in the public schools or whether some version of the biblical creation stories should be taught as a fact. That's because some Christians argue that to be a Christian, we have to believe that everything in the Bible is factual truth. And if it is, then that is what should be taught in the public schools. Otherwise, we're teaching falsehood to our children. For them, real Christian faith is a matter of believing or giving mental assent to certain propositions, one of which is that everything in the Bible must be accepted as literal fact. Sometimes that leaves those of us who want to be faithful Christians, and at the same time live in the world of the 21st century, feeling like Alice in Wonderland when the Red Queen requires her to "believe six impossible things before breakfast."

Now I think there are some things to which we must give mental assent if we're going to call ourselves Christians, such as asserting that God is real, or that Jesus Christ is central to Christian faith, but when we limit our understanding of faith to believing certain doctrines or ideas, it tends to create a large gap between belief and ethics, between what we say we believe and how we behave. We may even recognize this and try to bring the two together, but the tendency is always there for a gap to exist between belief and behavior. It's quite possible to hold all the correct beliefs and still behave abominably. Faith treated as a noun has limited usefulness at best, and harmful consequences at times. How else could the CEO of Enron

Corporation, who professed to be a reasonably devout Christian, go to his church Sunday after Sunday, sing hymns, confess the creeds, profess faith in Jesus Christ and yet participate without, apparently so much a qualm, in the sort of business practices that robbed employees of their jobs and pensions, defrauded investors, and brought that corporate house of cards tumbling down? How could some priests who held what they considered absolutely orthodox beliefs, molest children, and how could some of their superiors, equally orthodox in their beliefs, sweep their crimes under the rug to avoid scandal.

The reason such gaps between belief and behavior exist, you see, is that there is very little support in the New Testament for the notion that faith is a noun. Faith is not primarily assent to a particular set of doctrines or beliefs. Faith is not holding right ideas about God. Faith is not about the content of creeds or confessions, useful as those can be in helping us affirm or summarize our beliefs. The word “orthodoxy” itself, which we often use in the sense of “right belief” actually means “right praise.”

Faith is not primarily a noun; faith is primarily a verb. And this is very clear in both our lessons this morning. In our Gospel lesson, we hear Jesus saying, *“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 in heaven.”* In other words, acknowledging Christ as the risen Lord, is not a matter of saying the right words or believing the right doctrines; it’s a matter of living a life that conforms to God’s will. Faith, genuine faith, is expressed through action. Or to put in more popular contemporary terms, faith is not “talking the talk,” but rather “walking the walk.”

And then Jesus follows this definition of faith up with a parable about the wise home builder and the foolish home builder. One of the first songs I learned in Sunday School as a child, after *“Jesus Loves Me,”* was *“The wise man built his house upon the rock. . .?”* complete with

motions for the rains coming down and the floods rising up. (Actually, that pretty well describes the past few weeks here in Maine, doesn’t it?) Anyway, the point of both parable and song is clear enough isn’t it. *“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them, will be like a wise homebuilder who built a house on the rock. . . But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish homebuilder who built a house on the sand.”* That’s not particularly complicated, is it? But it’s what faith is all about.

Why do we have such a hard time with such plain words as we hear Jesus saying in this passage? I suspect it’s because it’s much easier to have faith when we make it into a noun than it is to have faith that is a verb. What really does it cost us to have faith as a noun other than some mental gymnastics? It gives us a good feeling, in fact, to think that we’re on the right side—the side with correct beliefs. It’s much easier to build a sand castle on the beach than it is to build a real house on a solid foundation. Believing, in the sense of giving mental or emotional assent to some ideology or doctrine or conventional wisdom is easy; doing what Jesus says can sometimes be hard. That’s really the long and short of it. Faith as a noun is easy; it costs little. It’s what Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as “cheap grace.”

It’s fitting to remember Bonhoeffer and others like him on a weekend when we are also remembering the sacrifices that many of our fellow citizens have made in laying down their lives in the service of their country. Bonhoeffer was a young German theologian of great promise at the outbreak of World War II. At the time, he was a visiting professor at Union Seminary in New York, but when war broke out, instead of claiming asylum in the United States, which he could easily have done, he went home to Germany to work against the Nazis. Bonhoeffer’s battlefield was first in a seminary classroom, and later, as a resistance agent inside

the German Intelligence Service. He knew from his own experience the difference between faith as a noun— cheap grace— and faith as a verb. Believing is one thing, but doing what Jesus said— now that’s another story. That costs something. It’s risky. It may put us at odds with the religious or political or cultural orthodoxy of the day. It certainly put Jesus at odds with the religious orthodoxy of his own day; it got him killed in fact. It got Bonhoeffer killed too; he was hanged at Flossenburg concentration camp, at the express orders of Hitler, just three days before the camp was liberated by the Allies.

In the passage we heard this morning from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, he speaks about the way in which all people, both Jews and Gentiles, are accepted by God and declared to be in the right relationship to God on exactly the same basis— on whether or not they have faith. And the word he uses for faith, the common word for faith throughout the Bible, is an action word: it means literally, “to lean on or put one’s whole weight on something as a foundation.” Like Jesus, Paul understands faith as a verb, not a noun. To have faith in God, is to lean one’s whole weight on God, to make God the rock on which we build the house that is our life. In other words, to have faith is to trust God and to entrust ourselves to God. If we lean our lives on money or social status or national pride, or political ideology, then eventually, our lives will collapse. The foundation is not solid, and will not hold when the storms come. If we lean our lives on God, however, the gales of life can blow their worst, and our lives will stand firm and secure, even in the worst of times. Faith is about who we trust ourselves to. Faith is about doing the will of God because we have committed ourselves in trust to God as the Ultimate Reality, the Ultimate Foundation for our lives.

I think I began to learn something about the importance of building on a firm foundation one hot summer day back in Pennsylvania when I was about 14. My grandfather offered me and

my middle brother Rod, who was about 9 at the time, the opportunity to earn some pocket money by digging a trench for the footer for a new back porch on his house. Now Grandad was a stickler about most things, and he wanted that trench dug two feet deep and a foot wide and he wanted the sides and bottom squared off with a spade.

So Rod and I started in digging, and discovered that the dirt was really compacted, so we had to use a pick to get through it, and the job began to look a lot less attractive than the pocket money Grandad was offering. But he wasn’t about to let us out of the deal. And every time he checked on us, it seemed as though we weren’t deep enough at this end or wide enough, or square enough, or something. It was hot, dirty work, and we would much rather have been expending our energy playing baseball or fishing.

But eventually we got it done—took us most of the day— and then we got to mix the concrete and pour the footer too. But after it was done, we had to admit a certain pride in our work. And as far as I know, that back porch is still standing.

Genuine faith that offers us that kind of solid footer on which to build our lives comes through a personal commitment we make each and every day to do the will of God, as Jesus said we must, and as Jesus himself did. That’s the primary action that faith involves— that daily committing of our selves, our wills, our minds, our bodies to God.

In the early 20th century there was a famous French Canadian tightrope artist named Blondin. In one of his performances, before a huge crowd, he had strung a tightrope across Niagara Falls. He had walked across the rope back and forth several times, and had even ridden a bicycle over those thundering waters to wild cheers of applause. Finally he said to the crowd, “How many of you believe I can carry another person on my shoulders and walk safely to the other side?” Every hand in the crowd went up.

Everyone believed. For them, faith was a noun. “Great!” said Blondin. “Now which of you will volunteer to sit on my shoulders?” Needless to say, no one was ready to make that personal commitment to what they believed to be true. Faith as a verb was a little too risky.

To be able to make that act of personal commitment, means that we have to give ourselves the time, the space, and the quiet to listen to God in order to discern what it is God is calling us to do and where to invest our energies. If we only listen to the voices of the media or the advertising industry or the investment brokers on Wall Street or the politicians who inflame our fears or pander to our self-interest, we will never know the will of God or be able to entrust ourselves to God fully.

Gathering together for worship, searching the scriptures, quiet times of reflection and prayer, opening ourselves up to God in confession of our sins, seeking healing for our brokenness, paying attention to one another’s needs rather than primarily to our own needs, engaging one another in serious faith conversations about the real issues that matter to us and to our world even when we disagree, finding the courage to follow our convictions in the face of all the ideologies and beliefs and prejudices of the world around us— this is how we hear the words of Jesus and do them. This is the way we learn the grammar of faith. This is the way we build our houses, not on the shifting sands of time, but on the Rock of Ages.