

Faith

October 6, 2019

Pastor Tom Ford
Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Luke 17:

[5] The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

[6] And the Lord said, "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

[7] "Will any one of you, who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down at table'?

[8] Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink'?

[9] Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?

[10] So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

Grace be unto you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

Gospel song writer Tommy Dorsey had been invited to do a concert in St. Louis in 1932. He accepted the invitation begrudgingly knowing his wife Nettie was expecting any day. Following a performance, a telegram came saying his wife had died. Dorsey flew home to Chicago immediately only to find that Nettie had died in child birth and that his new born child had also died. He buried both in the same casket. As you might imagine, the tragedy hit Dorsey hard. He hid away in his bedroom for days, and cursed the God that he had heard his father preach about for so many years.

One evening he sat at his piano at home just as he had done so many times before. His fingers began to pound out a tune that he had never heard before, and unfamiliar words rolled through his mind.

"Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light: Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home."

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church



Those words have inspired many of us through the years. In the midst of his grief, Tommy Dorsey had been moved by the Holy Spirit with words and music emanating from his faith, and comforting to both him and us.¹

Pisteuo in Greek.. Ich Glaube in German. Credo in Latin. I believe in English. We call it faith. Yet, what is it? And how much of it do we need? And how do we get it?

The Bible only directly defines faith in one place: Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Even so, the Bible as a whole speaks of faith numerous times. And those of us who are Christian know in our hearts that faith is what we need and must have if we are to be able to live and follow our Lord and do what he calls us to do and be who he calls us to be.

Yet, what is faith? How do you define it? How do you understand it?

Some people have the notion that the Christian faith is a set of beliefs a person has to give intellectual ascent or agreement to. If I accept certain propositions or teachings, then I have faith. Like a six 24-hour-day creation. A literal virgin birth. A literal big fish swallowing a real man.

Other people believe that faith is a relationship. In that relationship there is give and take. Like Abraham arguing for Sodom and Gomorrah. God has ideas, I have ideas and prayer is talking it over until we get things worked out. We like that one too, because in that understanding God is our buddy and we get some say about the cosmic order of things. It makes us feel powerful and important.²

Other people want to understand faith as trust. We give up a little more control to move from relationship to trust. If faith is a relationship I get some say. When faith is trust then I have to give more of it over to God. I assume that God has better ideas than I do, maybe understands the big picture and even when I disagree I will trust God to do the right thing. Of course that still means that God is going to fill me in on the plan. I'm not totally in the dark. I can trust God to do the right thing, but I get to know what the right thing is.³

¹ Story taken from Dan Flanagan=s sermon from Sunday, September 21, 2003

² Stephen P. Loy <http://www.zianet.com/peacelutheran/Sermon2001/Ser100701.htm>

³ Ibid.

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church



Other people understand faith as surrender. Have you ever participated in a faith circle? In my younger days, a group of Christians would stand in a circle with one person in the center blindfolded. That person then had to keep her back straight and fall either forward or backward into the arms of the people in the circle. It was an act of surrender. If they caught you everything was fine. If they let you fall it was already too late, you were going to end up on your back on the floor. I think faith is something like that. It is falling into the arms of God day after day after day. Hoping that God will catch us. It is trust times ten. It is relinquishing all pretense of control. It is accepting that the relationship is by nature unequal. God is God, I am servant. Much like Isaiah, Here I am Lord - I have no idea what you are going to do with me next - send me.⁴

The disciples in today's Gospel come to Jesus and ask him, "Increase our faith!" Aren't we in many ways those same disciples? Isn't that why we've come to church this morning? We want more faith.

Like Jesus' disciples, we have a lot to contend with. All the things we know our Lord expects of us, like managing our time, talents and monies for God's work on earth, like monogamy, like actively reaching out to serve the poor and hungry, like forgiving our brothers and sisters repeatedly, like not giving up in the face of terminal illness or death. We have much to contend with in this life. And we understandably, but incorrectly get the notion that we can contend with it all so much the better if we can only get more faith. More bullets to fire, more enemies killed. More faith, more of life's problems successfully dealt with.

Jesus tells his disciples now and then, more faith is not what you need. You have faith already. In fact you have just a little faith. A tiny bit. About the size of a mustard seed. That's all you need. Just let it come forth! Just release it!

Some years ago a woman died who was considered by many to be a living saint. Her name was Dorothy Day. She started all kinds of activities: a newspaper, "The Catholic Worker", houses of hospitality for vagrants, feeding programs; Christian communal farms, etc. She would overhear others saying of her, "She is a saint." She would get upset, turn to the speaker, and say: "Don't say that. Don't make it too easy for yourself. Don't escape this way. You say that to convince yourself that you are different from me, that I am different from you. That is easy. In that case you can go your own way. I am not different from you. I am not a saint. I am like you. You could easily do what I do. You don't need any more than you have; get kicking, please!"

⁴ Ibid.

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church



“Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace” is a made-for television movie about the life and death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, leader of the Confessing Church of Germany during the 1940's. This Lutheran pastor actively opposed Adolf Hitler and was arrested and sentenced to death. One scene in the movie is a conversation between Bonhoeffer and a boy in the cell next to him. Speaking through the wall, Bonhoeffer identifies himself to this crying boy as a pastor and assures him that he is not alone. He asks him to pray. A muffled voice replies, "I don't believe in God." A German guard interrupts with, "It won't do any good. He's going to be shot any day now." Bonhoeffer leans against the cell wall and calls for the prisoner next door to place his hands on the wall. As Bonhoeffer begins his prayer, no hands appear. But in the midst of his prayer, the boy begins to respond both verbally and physically. "Lord, it's dark in me;" prays Bonhoeffer. "In you is day. I am alone, but you will stay. I am afraid; you never cease. I am at war; in you is peace." As dawn breaks, the scene pictures the firing of a pistol. The same German officer appears in Bonhoeffer's cell. "I thought you might like to know. The boy from the next cell - he was very calm. It surprised everyone. He was executed this morning." Bonhoeffer was later executed, too. But the scene involving Bonhoeffer and this young boy illustrates the tiny, elemental and supremely powerful mustard seed faith Jesus challenges his disciples to call forth, rely on and release in their lives.⁵

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? You don't need more faith. You have faith. Just a little bit. That's all you need. Let it come forth! Release it! What you have is so powerful, when released, that God can use it to give you all you would ever hope for or need for following His Will, dealing with all your problems and living in our troubled world.

The Apostle Paul said the same thing, in another way, to Timothy, in what is our Second Lesson this morning: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you ..."⁶

Now I will try in closing to show you what this looks like. John Powell, a professor at Loyola University in Chicago tells about a student in his Theology of Faith class named Tommy:

Some twelve years ago, I stood watching my university students file into the classroom for our first session in the Theology of Faith. That was the day I first saw Tommy. My eyes and my mind both blinked. He was combing his long hair, which hung six inches below his shoulders. It was

⁵ Thanks to Dan Flanagan for this story.

⁶ II Timothy 1:5-6a

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church



73 N. Hill Avenue • Pasadena, CA 91106 • 626-792-4169 • www.hillavenuegrace.org

the first time I had ever seen a boy with hair that long. I guess it was just coming into fashion then. I know in my mind that it isn't what's on your head but what's in it that counts; but on that day I wasn't prepared and my emotions flipped. I immediately filed Tommy under "S" for strange...very strange. Tommy turned out to be the "atheist in residence" in my Theology of Faith course. He constantly objected to, smirked at, or whined about the possibility of an unconditionally loving Father/God. We lived with each other in relative peace for one semester, although I admit he was for me, at times, a serious pain in the back pew. When Tommy came up at the end of the course to turn in his final exam, he asked in a slightly cynical tone, "Do you think I'll ever find God?" I decided instantly on a little shock therapy. "No, I said very emphatically. "Oh," he responded, "I thought that was the product you were pushing." I let him get five steps from the classroom door and then called out, "Tommy! I don't think you'll ever find Him, but I am absolutely certain that He will find you!" He shrugged a little and left my class and my life. I felt slightly disappointed at the thought that he had missed my clever line -- He will find you! At least I thought it was clever.

Later I heard that Tommy had graduated and I was duly grateful. Then a sad report came. I heard that Tommy had terminal cancer. Before I could search him out, he came to see me. When he walked into my office, his body was very badly wasted and the long hair had all fallen out as a result of chemotherapy. But his eyes were bright and his voice was firm, for the first time, I believe. "Tommy, I've thought about you so often. I hear you are sick," I blurted out. "Oh, yes, very sick. I have cancer in both lungs. It's a matter of weeks." "Can you talk about it, Tom?" I asked. "Sure, what would you like to know?" he replied. "What's it like to be only twenty-four and dying?" "Well, it could be worse." "Like what?" "Well, like being fifty and having no values or ideals, like being fifty and thinking that booze, seducing women, and making money are the real 'biggies' in life."

I began to look through my mental file cabinet under 'S' where I had filed Tommy as strange. (It seems as though everybody I try to reject by classification, God sends back into my life to educate me.)

"But what I really came to see you about," Tom said, "is something you said to me on the last day of class." (He remembered!) He continued, "I asked you if you thought I would ever find God and you said, 'No!' Which surprised me. Then you said, 'But He will find you.' I thought about that a lot, even though my search for God was hardly intense at that time." (My clever line. He thought about that a lot!)

"But when the doctors removed a lump from my groin and told me that it was malignant, that's when I got serious about locating God. And when the malignancy spread into my vital organs, I

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church



really began banging bloody fists against the bronze doors of heaven. But God did not come out. In fact, nothing happened. Did you ever try anything for a long time with great effort and with no success? You get psychologically glutted, fed up with trying, and then you quit.

"Well, one day I woke up, and instead of throwing a few more futile appeals over that high brick wall to a God who may be or may not be there, I just quit. I decided that I didn't really care about God, about an afterlife, or anything like that. I decided to spend what time I had left doing something more profitable. I thought about you and your class and I remembered something else you had said: 'The essential sadness is to go through life without loving, but it would be almost equally sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you had loved them.'

"So, I began with the hardest one, my Dad. He was reading the newspaper when I approached him." "Dad." "Yes, what?" he asked without lowering the newspaper. "Dad, I would like to talk with you." "Well, talk" "I mean, it's really important." The newspaper came down three slow inches. "What is it?" "Dad, I love you. I just wanted you to know that."

Tom smiled at me and said it with obvious satisfaction, as though he felt a warm and secret joy flowing inside of him. "The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did two things I could never remember him ever doing before. He cried and he hugged me. We talked all night, even though he had to go to work the next morning. It felt so good to be close to my father, to see his tears, to feel his hug, to hear him say that he loved me." "It was easier with my mother and little brother. They cried with me, too, and we hugged each other, and started saying real nice things to each other. We shared the things we had been keeping secret for so many years. I was only sorry about one thing - that I had waited so long. Here I was, just beginning to open up to all the people I had actually been close to."

"Then, one day I turned around and God was there. He didn't come to me when I pleaded with Him. I guess I was like an animal trainer holding out a hoop, 'C'mon, jump through. C'mon, I'll give you three days, three weeks.' Apparently God does things in His own way and at His own hour. But the important thing is that He was there. He found me. You were right. He found me even after I stopped looking for Him." "Tommy," I practically gasped, "I think you are saying something very important and much more universal than you realize. To me, at least, you are saying that the surest way to find God is not to make Him a private possession, a problem solver, or an instant consolation in time of need, but rather by opening to love. You know, the Apostle John said that. He said: 'God is love, and anyone who lives in love is living with God and God is living in him.' "

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church



73 N. Hill Avenue • Pasadena, CA 91106 • 626-792-4169 • www.hillavenuegrace.org

"Tom, could I ask you a favor? You know, when I had you in class you were a real pain. But (laughingly) you can make it all up to me now. Would you come into my present Theology of Faith course and tell them what you have just told me? If I told them the same thing it wouldn't be half as effective as if you were to tell them." "Ooh . I was ready for you, but I don't know if I'm ready for your class." "Tom, think about it. If and when you are ready, give me a call." In a few days Tom called, said he was ready for the class, and that he wanted to do that for God and for me. So we scheduled a date. However, he never made it. He had another appointment, far more important than the one with me and my class.

Of course, his life was not really ended by his death, only changed. He made the great step from faith into vision. He found a life far more beautiful than the eye of man has ever seen or the ear of man has ever heard or the mind of man has ever imagined. Before he died, we talked one last time. "I'm not going to make it to your class," he said. "I know, Tom." "Will you tell them for me? Will you ... tell the whole world for me?" "I will, Tom. I'll tell them. I'll do my best."

So, to all of you who have been kind enough to listen to this simple statement about faith and love, thank you..... And to you, Tommy, somewhere in the sunlit, verdant hills of heaven --- I told them, Tommy, as best I could.

A tiny bit of faith already in us released in love. And we're good to go!

Amen.

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

