

## Faith or Knowledge?

Romans 14:01b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Do you remember the woman who had been haemorrhaging for 12 years and had spent all her money on all kinds of doctors and was no better? And then Jesus was going to heal someone else and was in a crowd, and she stretched out her hand and touched the hem of his garment, and she was healed and her haemorrhaging stopped right there. Now why was she healed? Was there some magic in the cloth of Jesus' garment? And you know there wasn't because Jesus said, "I perceive that power has gone out from me." So obviously it was power that had come from Jesus. But why did the power go to the woman? I mean why didn't it go to all the other people in the crowd, why did it go to that woman?

Probably you could answer the same way as I can, "Well, didn't Jesus make it clear? He said, "Your faith has healed you." It was her faith, that's what healed her." And there probably isn't one of us here this morning, who doesn't agree that faith is the key to everything. In Hebrews 11 it says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." And so, probably every one of us here would say, "Yeah, faith is probably the most important thing in the world." And yet am I not right in saying that even though you and I have studied faith and read books about faith and listened to countless sermons on faith, probably there are quite a few of us here, who have certainly never had our sickness healed through our faith. And there are probably a surprising number of us here, who actually wonder if we are pleasing God and who are very uncertain still about what faith really is.

And so we talk about faith a lot and we share with each other about it. But yet it might surprise us how many of us are kind of still a little vague about what faith actually is. So that's what I would suggest we do today. We are just beginning another chapter in Romans and that's a big moment in our life here in this body, that we are beginning chapter 14. It might be a good opportunity to look again at what faith is, and you will see it mentioned, loved ones, in Romans 14:1. "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions."

Now what is the essence of faith? Only if we are clear about that will we know what it is to be weak in faith or strong in faith. You could begin at least with one of the verses we quoted already; it's in Hebrews 11:6. And it's that one you remember, where I mentioned, without faith it is impossible to please God. Hebrews 11:6: "And without faith, it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." So, that's an essential element of faith, that you believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him. So that's one essential of faith.

Faith is believing certain things are true. So, you believe that 2+2 equals 4. Or you believe that the world is round, or you believe that your car is where you left it before you came into service, you hope. Faith is believing that certain things are true. In other words faith is to some extent an idea, it's an idea in your head, it's a concept that your mind grasps. It's something that you think; it's something that you can tie down as existing as a thought in your mind. Faith is at least that, it's at least a thought or an idea.

Now even in the New Testament, faith went further than that. It referred not only to believing those things but it referred to the things that you believed. So, it began to be known as "The

Faith” or “The Christian Faith.” And that’s even in the New Testament. You get in that little book called Jude. The book of Jude is easy, loved ones, because it’s just before Revelation. And if you don’t know where that is, you are in trouble. It’s Jude and verse 3, "Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." So even in the New Testament faith went further than just believing certain things are true and it began to refer to the things that you believed were true.

And of course that was because in the early centuries people were interpreting Jesus in all kinds of ways. You remember in the First and Second Century they disagreed about in what sense he was the Son of God. Some said, "Oh, he is just an ordinary human being, upon whom the Logos came when he was conceived in Mary's womb." Others said, "No, no he was existent from the very beginning." So they had to state what they believed about him and they stated this in forms of words which they called Creeds. So for instance, the Apostles' Creed tells you the things that the Apostles believed. The Athanasian Creed tries to deal with that issue of, "Is God really in Jesus and is Jesus really God?" And it's the creed you remember that says, "He is very God, a very God, begotten not made." And so that makes it very clear, that he is divine.

So the faith began to refer to the things that people believed. And of course any of us here who went through confirmation class have no trouble believing that faith means that. Because in confirmation class, or in Methodist Church membership class, or in Baptist classes, we tended to concentrate on what Luther believed about salvation, or what the Conference believed about adult baptism, or what Wesley believed about faith, and our emphasis was on what we believed. So all of us know that, "Yes, it's very easy to say that faith is what you believe." The disastrous tendency of course is all of us could testify too, and it is to begin subtly to believe, that if you think the right things about God, then you are a child of God. And I think many of us got caught in that, not only in our confirmation classes but maybe here in later years.

We think, "Oh yes, I believed the right things about God, therefore I am a child of God." And of course there is a verse in the Bible that makes it very clear that the inhabitants of hell believe the right things. And that believing the right thing is not all that faith is, and believing the right thing does not necessarily make you a child of God rather than a creature. And that verse loved ones, is in James 2:19, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe - and shudder." So, even the devils in hell believe the right things about God. You know loved ones, that it's very easy to regard yourself as a Christian simply because you believe the orthodox things that all other Christians believe, and indeed there is a great tendency in our day, isn't there, to regard faith as just that.

Faith is believing the right things about God, that's what makes you a child of God and the only way to grow in maturity is to absorb more and more teaching about the right things to believe about God. And so many of us think that growing deeper in faith is just getting more and more information about God and being able to explain more and more difficult questions that come up to us about revelation, or about the end times or about Baptism, or about the fullness of the spirit, or about new birth. And indeed, we can carry it even further, we will say, "Oh yes, and about the behavior that stems from that belief." You need to know all about that, you need to know for instance, what kind of attitude a Christian should take to abortion, what kind of attitude a Christian should take to nuclear disarmament. That's all faith and if you have all that, and you get more and more of that, then you are growing in maturity.

Loved ones, that's not what faith is. That's a necessary basis for faith, that belief part. But you can see that even the demons believe the right things and yet they shudder, because they are not children of God. And in our day, when Christianity is so popular, it's very easy to go to church Sunday after Sunday and to feel, "Well, I believe all the right things and I know all the answers, so I must be a child of God." Loved ones, even the devils know the right answers, but that doesn't make them children of God.

What more is faith then? If it isn't simply believing the right things or it isn't the right things that are believed, if it's more than that, what more is it? Well I think you can see a little more of what it is, if you look at that lesson that we read for the New Testament reading earlier in the service, and it's back in Matthew 8, if you like to look at it. And you remember the centurion came to Jesus and he said, "My servant is desperately ill and he is in great pain and in great distress."

And you see that in Matthew 8:6, "And saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress.'" And the centurion's faith in Jesus certainly believed that he was the same yesterday, today, and forever -- that he was able to heal sickness. And so he had that faith, but he also expressed that to Jesus. He said, "Lord, will you heal my servant?" And not only that, but he had such confidence in Jesus that he said, "Look you don't even need to come to my house. I know that you have power over life and death. I know that you can just speak a word at this moment; you don't need even to come under my roof. I am not worthy to have you come there. Just speak the word and my servant will be healed."

And you can see that there faith is not just believing but it's actually putting yourself out on quite a limb, isn't it? Because it's obvious that he did care about the servant. I mean he was concerned -- otherwise he wouldn't have bothered, it would just be another slave, he'd let him die -- but he was concerned about him. He said, "My servant is ill and in great distress." So he had a lot to lose if Jesus didn't come through, or he had a lot to lose if Jesus couldn't work at a distance.

And real faith is that kind of thing. It's action that depends absolutely on God coming through in a certain situation. And of course, brothers and sisters, isn't it our tragedy that we try to avoid those situations? We try to avoid those if we possibly can. We try to run this life absolutely safely by our own power, so that we'll never need to end up in that spot. And indeed when we do cry out to God in desperate emergency it's a trouble situation, it's a situation that we don't want to repeat again. Indeed we'll often use those words, we'll say, "Well there is nothing left to do, but pray," because we run the rest of our lives, virtually without God's intervention. And actually without the expression of much faith. And yet faith is only faith when it's expressed in action like the centurion's.

You can see the dire consequences that would have come about, had his faith been misplaced. You can see what a fool he would have appeared -- he was a ruler of the people -- if he had gone to this man and asked him to heal his servant, and nothing had happened. Now that's faith, ready to get itself into tricky situations that will be disastrous, if God does not come through -- same with Moses, you remember? Thousands of men, women, and children all around him and the Red Sea in front and behind him Pharaoh's army, so he hadn't too many alternatives, and yet he was in the same spot. It would have been nice to get into his tent and do a little quiet prayer. "Lord, I am whispering so that the rest don't hear you." But he didn't, he didn't. That dear guy went right out there and got the old staff and stretched it right across the water and kind of commanded the water to go back and he would have been a dumb-dumb if not a thing had happened.

But do you see a wee bit, what faith is? See, it is us going on record ourselves; we have to go on record. And if you are like me, you're a little fearful being that hopes that you will get God to commit himself without you committing yourself. And loved ones, if you keep on doing that, your faith will stay mental and intellectual, it will. That's what happened to me for years. I believed the right things and I had a whole intellectual experience, but nothing ever happened in my life by God's power because I never acted on my faith. I never went out on a limb and trusted God to actually do something, in a situation where if he didn't do it, I would have egg on my face. I never did that, I always kept clear of those awkward situations and yet, that's what faith is.

Faith is committing yourself in action that makes sense only if God comes through. Now, that's what the Bible says, if you look at it in James 2:22, loved ones. And God is talking here through James about Abraham and his sacrifice of Isaac. Verse 22, "You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works." In other words, God said, "I want you to lay your son Isaac on the altar, and you have got all the things underneath him ready for making a fire, and I want you then, to be prepared to sacrifice him." Now, Abraham didn't say, "Now Lord, he is heavy, how I am going to get him up there? You know, I am going to sacrifice him. You know I don't need to actually do it." But he did actually have to do it.

Now, that's where we lose it. We play a mental game, we say, "But God you know I am ready, you know I am really ready, I mean you know I am ready to give this money, you know I can trust you with that, you know Lord, so, why not come through just before I give the money?" And God won't do it because he requires you to express your faith in actual action, so that you are committed, and only when you are committed will he commit himself. It's the same as conversion, loved ones, it is. Some of you say, "Wait a minute, what's the big deal about making restitution, what's the big deal about making apologies to other people, what's the big deal about giving money back that I stole? Sure God is a sophisticated person. He knows if I am serious inside."

God will not move an inch until you move. He won't, because faith is action, action that makes sense only if God comes through and that's why James says, "Faith is completed by actions." So faith is not just believing the right things about God; faith is not even the right things that are believed, faith is actually action that makes sense only if God comes through.

And loved ones, it's actually more than that. Because some of you might say, "Oh then faith is kind of a calculated risk, it's kind of a throwing yourself out on a limb to show that you really believe. It's kind of a wild gamble; it's an Evel Knieval [an American daredevil and entertainer] kind of thing. You just take a run and a jump and a leap, just to show God and show all the angels.

Well, it's interesting that those men that express the faith, didn't seem to have that jittery risky kind of feeling, did they? I mean they seemed very solid about it. If you look back at Matthew there, at that centurion and you realize that he was a man who was respected in the society and obviously was a man that was reliable and responsible and a man that did not gamble. And you see his approach to Jesus in Matthew 8:8. "The centurion answered him, (answered Jesus) "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it."

In another words, the centurion had great respect for Jesus. He pointed out, "Lord, I myself have power to command my servants and my soldiers. But I know you well enough to know, that all that

company of heaven is at your disposal, so I know it's nothing to you, to say to an angel, 'Go to this man's house and heal his servant.'" In other words, the centurion was not going out on some wild limb. The centurion knew Jesus and he knew who Jesus was and what he was like, and he trusted him deeply and had a deep confidence in his abilities. That's what faith is. Faith is a confidence and trust in your Jesus. It's a deep confidence that you have in Jesus, your own personal friend. That's what makes the going out on a limb seem so easy.

It's a close intimate confidence, with a person whom you have got to know day after day, through your prayer and your Bible study. And you have begun to know him and have confidence in him, that's what faith is. Faith is not an "I - it" relationship. It's not a faith in beliefs or a faith in certain knowledge about God. Faith is a close intimacy with your Savior, that's it, loved ones. It's a confidence in Jesus; it's a trust in Jesus, that's what faith is. It's a personal relationship with the Son of God.

It starts with you believing that he is there and speaking to him in prayer, as if he is there, but it continues as he begins to speak back to you, through your thoughts at times and sometimes apart from your thoughts. But as you wait before him and spend time with him, you begin to get to know him. Loved ones, I think some of you have real troubles with faith, because you don't actually spend much time praying, and I don't blame you in a way, I mean it gets kind of boring if nothing is happening. And yet, you have to stay there long enough for your own thoughts to run out, do you see that? It's not that God is not trying to get through to you; he is trying to get through to you. But it's like what happens with those FM radios when you get near the center of the city, there is one that just goes out every time it comes near the IDS tower. It's that God is trying to get through to you but there is so much interference, so much crackling, so much high frequency noise out of your own head, you have so many thoughts and so many ideas in your own mind, that his stuff is hitting all that shrapnel as it comes towards you. And you have to stay before him long enough for all that to run down.

And so there is a real need to be prepared to wait in quietness before him and you know anyway that's a good thing, good for mental health according to everybody today. Nobody is quiet, nobody is at peace, nobody rests; so even just from that angle it's good. To be quiet before God, to be still and know that he is God and then to begin to say, "Jesus if you are there, will you somehow try to get through to me? I need to know you myself. I need to know you myself, not what Pastor says about me, not what somebody else says about you, but I need to know you myself. Jesus, will you somehow come through to me? I need you badly." Loved ones it's there that you begin to develop a confidence and a trust in Jesus himself. And so in the New Covenant meaning, faith is a belief that you have been completely changed in Jesus. That God has destroyed all the evil in you and all the evil in your life's circumstances in Jesus.

And then secondly, it is a life filled with actions that are based on that faith. So if all your old desires have been destroyed, then you no longer want those desires, so your actions show that. You don't want those desires, you simply don't want them, you have no time for them. If you really do believe that all the evil in your circumstances have been destroyed, then you don't face this week with fear, you face it with confidence. And then you do that not because you have worked yourself up into it, not because you want to prove to yourself that you have faith, but because you have confidence in Jesus. You know him, and you know that he is going to come through in this particular issue.

But finally, faith is confidence in Jesus, confidence in a person whom you know intimately, because

you spend time with him day by day. And loved ones, that's for all of us here, really. That's for all of us, whether we have suffered the old confirmation classes or whatever we had been through, that's for all of us here. You can get to know Jesus because he is alive today and he is the same yesterday, today and forever and he'll start right back at 'A,' right back at square one with you. Never fear, he'll start right back at the beginning with you, if that's where you have to start. But faith is confidence in him. So, what is faith? It's trust in a person called Jesus.

Let us pray:

Dear Father, we know these things in our heads, and yet Father we often find ourselves running around the edges of this thing called faith. Trying to make it real for us by all kinds of techniques and reading all kinds of books. We tried even by going to the Bible study groups and coming to church service. But Father we do see that there is one simple way to have faith, and that is to begin to treat your Son Jesus for real. So, Lord Jesus, we would begin to talk to you personally as if you are really alive and as if you are really a person.

And we ask you to forgive us for the brief times that we have tried to pray. We realize that we would give more time to an earthly king than we've given to you. So Jesus, we are going to spend some time waiting upon you, as people of old waited upon kings. We are going to spend some time waiting upon you and give you a chance to come through to us and to let us know that you are real. And Lord, we know that there is nothing else will make up for that knowledge, knowledge of you as a real person, who is our friend. So dear Jesus, we would ask you to do that for every one of us here who is willing to start seeking you with all our heart. We give ourselves to you for this purpose Lord, so that we may begin to exercise faith and may begin to experience salvation. We thank you that you are real and that you are a person, thank you Lord. Now, the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us, now and evermore. Amen.