

Faith is Personal Trust

Romans 14:01c

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Will you take a Bible please and turn to Romans 14:1: "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions." I think many of us would say that's a good verse. There should be more verses like that, because that's me, I am still a bit weak in my faith and I think many of us might think that. Yeah, that's good, that's talking about me because I am weak in faith. Or somebody asks you, "How is your relationship with God?" And you say, "Well, it's all right but it's just my faith that is weak." And yet, as year passes year, you find yourself tending to say the same thing, "Well yeah, if I just could get my faith a bit stronger, I'd be okay." And then five years pass and you find yourself still saying that, "Well, if I could just get my faith a wee bit stronger, I'd be surer of myself and surer of my relationship with God."

Now why is that? Why is it that so many of us are hoping year after year that our faith will get stronger and yet year after year we're still surprised how weak it is? Well, one reason can be this: that it isn't faith at all. It isn't faith at all. You may say, "Well, what is it then?" Well, it's belief; it's belief. I think many of us have belief; we have belief that certain things are true. That God exists, that Jesus is his Son, that Jesus died to bring us salvation. That God is willing to forgive us our sins, we believe all these things and we have a very strong belief, but it isn't faith. And you may say, "Now come on, belief is part of faith, isn't it? So, surely in a way, you can call belief faith."

Yes, loved ones, it is part of faith. But there are vital elements in faith that make it absolutely different in essence and quality from belief. In fact there is a real way in which belief is something like a stone. It's inanimate, it's dead and it doesn't matter how long you wait, it doesn't matter how many centuries pass by, the stone will never turn into a flower because the stone is dead and the flower is living. There is a real sense in which belief and faith have the same relationship to each other. It doesn't matter how long you wait, belief will never evolve into faith.

I think many of us experience great frustration in our life with God and in our own private personal life because we're always hoping that our belief will somehow evolve into faith. And the fact is they are two different kinds of beasts, that's it. They are two very different kinds of thing; they are as different, one from the other, as a stone is from a flower. One is just as dead as the stone and one is just as living as the flower.

Now if you'd say to me, "Well, what is the difference?" I think that I could point out one of the obvious differences in a story that some of you have heard before. It's the story of one of the old time Evel Knievels [a daredevil] -- he was the great Blondin and he specialized, you remember, in walking tight ropes in all kinds of hideously dangerous places. And on this particular day, he stretched a rope right across Niagara Falls. And with the crowd kind of gasping, he lifted a balancing pole and he walked across, right over the tight rope, right over Niagara Falls to the other side. And then he amazed everybody by laying the balancing pole down and walking back across the rope to the side he started from. And then they thought that was enough, but he went over and he picked up a wheelbarrow, that had a groove in the wheel, and he put the groove and the wheel on the rope and he walked back over again with the wheelbarrow, and got to the other side. And

everybody of course, was applauding madly.

And then he said, "Is there anyone here who believes that I could take that wheelbarrow back across Niagara Falls but this time with a person in the wheelbarrow?" And there was absolute quietness until one big guy got up and said, "Blondin, I believe you are the greatest, you are the greatest, I believe you can do it, you can do it, I have no doubt you can do it." And Blondin said, "You do?" And he said, "Yes." And Blondin said, "Get in." And the guy went pale and then he went red and then he sat down. That's belief, that's belief. That's belief. He believed the other guy could do it, as long as he didn't have to commit himself to that belief in any way by his actions. That's one difference, loved ones.

Mental belief is like holding that $E=MC^2$. Or old Martin Luther nailing up his 95 theses; $E=MC^2$, big deal. It doesn't matter to him, whether it does or not, doesn't make any big difference to his life, it doesn't take much to nail up 95 theses on something like that, because that doesn't affect your life, but that's just mental belief. Faith is committing yourself in action to what you say you believe, and many of us, of course, have never experienced faith, because we have never taken any action that would put us in a disastrous position if God failed to come through, we have never done that.

We say we believe God will take care of us, we say he will look after us, but we've been careful never to put ourselves in any position by our acts that would prove a disaster to us if God failed to come through. In other words, we always hedge our bets. We always have ourselves well looked after, so that if he comes through good, it's a help. If he doesn't, it's no big deal. The result is, we have never experienced faith and we've never had faith proven. And therefore we are very unsure of God. He has never for us come through at any memorable crisis moment when we have had to depend utterly and completely upon him, and so our belief has stayed a mental belief. And that's part of the difference between belief and action.

Belief is acceptance of certain concepts as being true, but faith is committing yourself in action, on the basis of those beliefs. In other words, it's God saying to the Israelites, "I am going to open the Jordan, so that you can go through and get into the Promised Land, but before I do it, the priests must walk ahead with the Ark of the Covenant and they must actually walk into the river." That's what faith is. Belief would be standing back saying, "Lord, just open it a little even, if I see the waves receding a little, I'll go, I'll go, but not until you have moved the waves just a little, move them a little, you must move them a little," that's belief. Faith is walking in; "I know you are going to move this river, Lord."

Or take the walls of Jericho. Belief is praying in your room, "Lord, will you bring those walls down? I am really praying to you and you can see I am praying, and you can see I am trusting you. You know I am trusting you Lord, I am praying, you bring the walls down." God is saying, "Get out walk round the wall seven times. Get out, walk around them seven times." You are saying, "No Lord, no, don't let me. Look, I might make a fool of myself if – well, I know it won't happen -- but what if it did? So I'll just pray quietly here." Reputation is saved and there is nothing being laid on you. That's belief. Faith is getting out, walking around the walls.

So, faith is acting on your belief. Now, you might say well, is that then what faith is? That's all it is, it's just belief in action. Well yes, but you have to be sure it's the belief that produces the action. I mean you can imagine the guy in the Blondin incident, getting into an awkward spot. He said, "Blondin, you are the greatest, I know you can do it," and then Blondin says, "Okay, get

in." And then the guy is kind of embarrassed and looks around and sees everybody watching him, and he thinks, well I don't trust this guy at all but everybody is looking at me and I've kind of put myself on a limb here, so I'd better get in. And you can imagine him possibly getting in, just because everybody else expected him to get in. And he'd have lost face if he hadn't got in or he might be some kind of daredevil and gambler himself and he might say, "Well, it's a calculated risk, I'll have a go with this." So, it is conceivable that he could actually act apparently in accordance with his belief but not really because of his belief, not because of any belief in Blondin but just because he put himself out on a limb.

So, there is a heartless Christian faith abroad in the land. There is a heartless Christian faith in America that believes all the right things about God and then is pretty well independent of any personal trust in Jesus. They believe certain things about abortion, they believe certain things about honesty, they believe certain things about filling in your income tax properly, they believe certain things about fornication, and they align their own lives and wills with those things. But actually there's no dynamic cause-effect relationship between their belief and their action. Indeed you could say they are both just beliefs.

And the tragedy of that faith is it is a heartless faith and a lifeless faith. And of course, it so often ends up in legalism; it is a mental ascent to certain things being true on the one side, and a mental ascent and a volitional commitment to certain ethical behavior. But the two are not actually related to each other dynamically. In other words, faith is not just belief, it's not just belief plus action, but faith is personal trust in Jesus. Go back to the guy in the Blondin situation. Faith for him would be observing Blondin, taking that barrow back and forward across the rope, and knowing Blondin's character and then trusting Blondin personally with his life, that's faith. Faith is not just a speculative rational thing, a cold lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head. It is a personal trust.

In other words, faith is believing that God has made all of us free. And that he has given us personalities that are very much like his own, but that we have messed them up in all kinds of ways and we have perverted them in all kinds of ways, so that they are incapable of doing what he wants us to do. And so we become desperate in our attempts to overcome our selfishness or overcome our sin or stop our fornication and we become overwhelmed by trying to overcome these things and we cannot, we cannot. And then we turn to Jesus and we realize that God has put us into him; has completely remade the whole human race in him, recreated us all new, and in desperation we hug Jesus to ourselves and we cling to him. That is faith.

It is a personal trust in Jesus. It is a coming to the place where you have tried everything else and nothing works and Jesus is your only hope. It's our personal trust in Jesus. It's too dangerous to say, it's our belief in the Savior. It's too easy to say the Savior. 'The Savior,' everybody else's Savior, it's not. It's a personal embracing of Jesus your dear friend, who had you inside himself when he died on Calvary. It's a personal embracing of him. It's a closeness to him.

You may say well, I can see that, I can see that there is a way in which that constrains you to be a certain kind of person that impersonal belief doesn't bring about, but how does that personal trust come? Much the way it came with your dad. If your dad was in the mold of our Heavenly Father -- now maybe he wasn't and maybe your mum was -- but if you have a dad that is in the mold of your Heavenly Father, he becomes very dear to you. You begin to know him. You begin to like the smell of his clothes, you begin to like the way he talks, and you enjoy being with him. If he tells you to hold

his hand and go somewhere, you go in absolute confidence, not because you know where he is taking you but because you know him, yourself. You trust him and you know that, really you'd be happy to die in his arms, because when you are in his arms, everything is safe. And that's because you've observed him over the years. You watch him, you know he loves you, you know he thinks the world of you; you know he wouldn't let anything happen to you that would be wrong.

Now that's with Jesus, that's what it is with Jesus. It's a personal trust in your dear Jesus. It's a readiness to go into hell as long as Jesus is with you, that's what faith is. It's closeness to Jesus. Now if you say, well, what makes that saving faith? Oh honesty. Honesty makes that saving faith, just honesty. As you cuddle-up to Jesus, he says, "You know that lust that you have? Well, part of the reason I bled on Calvary, was the pain of that being burned out of me, for you." Well, immediately, you say, "Lord, that's it, good, great, that's the end of lust for me, I walk free of that from this day on, if that's what it cost you Lord, great! I am finished with it."

Or another day, he whispers to you, "You know that pride that you have, well I bore that for you? It was destroyed in me and you have no need to have it, no need to have it at all. You can walk free of it this very moment." Well, you immediately say, "My Savior, my dearest friend and I walk free, that's the end of it, I am finished with it." It's that honesty that creates saving faith in you. It's that honesty with the Savior that enables him to witness in your heart, you are with Me in paradise. That's it. And whenever he says to you, "You see that selfishness you have? Well I bore that for you." And you shrug him off, and you say, "I want to hold on to that." You lose the witness of his Spirit in your conscience. You break with the friendly love that he is communicating to you. That's what faith is, loved ones.

Faith is an honest personal trust in Jesus and a life that remains absolutely in line with that honesty, that's what faith is. But it's a personal trust in Jesus. It's not this hard thing about, "I believe God is this" or "I believe in creation as opposed to evolution" -- and I do myself -- but that's not that stuff. I mean those are the things that you believe. But the Bible all the time says, "Whosoever believeth in creation, whosoever believeth in salvation, whosoever believeth in the Lord Jesus." Believing in Jesus is a personal faith in him.

There'll be a moment in all our lives, when all the rest of us cannot get through to you, you know that. That's real, doesn't matter if you're the most irreligious person here this morning, you know that's real. There'll come a moment when we all fade away from your consciousness. Either when you're a very old person and you're dying, or when you're a young person and you have had a disease of some kind that kills you. But there'll come a moment, when you're lying on the bed, and I don't know how many of you have been at a deathbed? I suppose I have been at many of them through the years. But at that moment, there is a great gap, it's amazing. Your dearest one can be holding your hand but there is a vast gap between you and them, there is a terrible gap that opens out then on that deathbed.

Now, you will come to that moment. Now it's vital at that moment, that you have your hand in the Person who has control of the other side of the universe. And who can lead you gently in. Now, that's why it's so important to have personal faith in Jesus. At that moment, it doesn't matter if you agree with Billy Graham, it doesn't matter if you agree with anybody else, doesn't matter if you agree with all the tenets of the Church. At that moment, the only thing that will give you peace is that you know your Savior, and you know he knows you, and that you have walked in close harmony with him over the years. And that everything that he has born for you on Calvary, you have let go out of your life. And there is no sin in your life that causes him pain that you have not relinquished.

That's what it is. So really, it's not any different from me knowing you. Not any different from that. It's just two persons being really honest with each other. And Jesus is willing to be that with you this morning.

Let us pray.

Jesus we would approach you, each one individually. And Lord we want real faith and we want to personally trust you. And we want to know that you know us. So Jesus, we even just want to say our names to you now. Seems funny, but at least just introduce ourselves to you, and tell you who we are. And Lord Jesus we want to be in you, and we want to know you. And we know that you alone know the way through death. And we know that at that time, we won't have the consciousness or the composure to think these things, and so we want to settle this now. Jesus, we want you to come into our lives and we want you to begin to save us from our sins. And Jesus we want to start being real with you ourselves.

So we ask you now to come into us. And we understand that we cannot treat you as a thing and we understand that since you're God, we can't play fast and loose with you and ignore you one day and expect you to come running to our bidding the next. Jesus, we will treat you as the Lord of the universe, and we will respect you, and we will do what you tell us to, if you'll make that plain to us. We'll begin to obey you in our wills, and we would thank you for all that you have done for us. So Jesus we ask you now to help us to start a new life with you personally, as our personal Savior and our own dear friend, we ask you to do this. And 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.