

What is Faith?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 14:22-33

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I have titled today's sermon "What is faith?" because so many people seem to have so many questions about faith. Most Christians believe that we are saved by faith and most of us have seen our salvation through faith as something to rejoice about, something to be excited about. But why are we saved through faith, and should we be saved through faith? Why does it matter so much to God if we believe that God exists? And more importantly, why would a good God care more about whether we believe in him than whether or not we care for his children, that is whether we visit the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked? Maybe we rejoice that we don't have to do all these things for our salvation, but shouldn't we have to do these things, and what does it say about God that we don't? Well, today in order to answer these questions, I have three things to say about faith.

The first thing I want to say about faith is that while it may seem that God cares whether or not we believe he exists, and while I would not presume to speak for God, it is my humble belief that God could care less whether we *only* believe that he exists. A statement of faith is not expressed by the words "I believe that God exists", it is expressed by the statement "I believe in God", just as we say in the Apostle's Creed "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Now, what is the difference between saying "I believe that God exists" and "I believe in God"? Well, there is quite a difference. If I say "I believe that the police exist", that doesn't mean that I support the police, I could believe that the police exist while wanting to see all the police departments in the world shut down. But if I say "I believe in the police", that means I put my trust in them, I support them. Now, in most circumstances, it would be strange

to say "I believe in the police" if I did not believe that such things as the police exist, and in the same way it would be strange to say "I believe in God" without saying "I believe that God exists." But belief in the existence of God is not enough for faith. Those who have faith in God believe that God exists, but we wouldn't think someone had faith in God who didn't care about God, who in fact was against God. In our gospel story for today we have Jesus walking on the water while the disciples are out on a boat in the middle of the night. Before Jesus identifies himself, the disciples are afraid, thinking they see a ghost. So Peter says to Jesus "If it is really you tell me to come to you on the water." So Jesus invites Peter to join him in the water and Peter walks toward him, but then as the wind begins to blow, we are told that Peter becomes afraid and he suddenly starts to sink. But just then, Jesus pulls him up out of the water saying "You of little faith, why did you doubt? You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Now, think if you will, how strange it would be if Jesus was talking about some kind of intellectual belief of Peter's. How strange would it be to think that what Jesus was talking about was some kind of intellectual agreement in Peter's mind that God exists and that Jesus is the Son of God. What Jesus was talking about of course is trust, trust in his power over the water. Trust that through the ability of God he could walk on the water. And when he says "Why did you doubt?" he is of course talking about fear, an emotional doubt, an emotional wavering. Belief in, not belief that.

One time, about a hundred years ago or so, there was a famous tightrope walker, Charles was his name, who worked in a circus in Paris. Well, Charles was well known for pushing a well barrow on a tight rope, all while being blindfolded. Everyone in Paris was willing to pay lots of money for a ticket to see the amazing Charles, and finally one day an American promoter talked to Charles after one of his performances. And this promoter said to the amazing Charles "Sir, I

can make you rich and famous by bringing your act to America. In fact, your name will be known all over the country if you will agree to take your act to Niagara Falls and walk from the Canadian side to the American side." And so he did. Charles got up on the tightrope with his blindfold and pushed his wheelbarrow starting at the Canadian side, and as he made it safely all the way to the American side the crowd went wild.

But when he got over to the American side, Charles looked at the promoter and said "Sir, did you believe I could do this?"

He said, "Well of course I did Charles."

Well, Charles said "And do you believe I can do it now?"

He said "Well, of course, I just saw you do it."

But Charles said, "No sir, do you really believe I can do it?"

He said "Yes, I really believe you can do it."

"Then you get in the wheelbarrow and we'll go back over to the other side." That is the kind of belief that faith is. That is belief in, the trust of belief in, not mere belief that.

The second thing I want to say to you today is that it is simply false that faith or belief of any kind is what saves us. It is God who saves us, not our faith. The author of Ephesians tells us that it is not faith but God's grace through faith which saves us. Faith is the through which we have our salvation, not the by which we have our salvation. Now, you may say "I never thought prepositions could matter so much", but prepositions are quite important in the bible. When you are in Seminary and you are studying Greek if you don't know your prepositions there isn't much you do know. Faith is the through which not the by which. Now, why does that matter? Well, it matters because as I have said many times, God's message to us is not "I don't love you

unless you believe in me.” If you believe that God’s love for us is unconditional, how could God’s love be unconditional if God’s message to us is I don’t love you unless anything? The word unless is a condition. So, God’s message to us is not “I don’t love you unless you believe in me.” God’s message to us is “I love you, so believe in me. I love you, so believe in me.” God loves us and desires for all of us to join him in the kingdom of heaven, but as all of us eventually find out sooner or later, you can love and love and love somebody else, but unless they are willing to trust you and believe that you love them, your love will never do any good. Without a willing lover and a willing beloved, isn’t love simply tragic? That is what Shakespeare is all about. Desdemona loved Othello but Othello didn’t believe that Desdemona loved him and so we have the tragedy of Othello. It is what every sad song in the world is all about. “Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away now at looks as though they’re here to stay. Oh I believe in yesterday. Why she had to go, I don’t know, she wouldn’t say. I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday.” So sad. By the way, I always wondered how the guy in this song, presumably Paul McCartney knew it was something wrong he said if she left without saying a word, but “wrong” rhymes with “long” so I guess you have to go with what rhymes instead of what makes sense. But loving someone who does not trust your love or believe that you love them is love in vain it is love that does not work, and the whole point of the gospel is that God’s love for us will not work either if we don’t trust God. And so it is not our faith that saves us, it is only our faith that makes our saving possible.

And then there is the third thing I want to say about faith. No, God does not save us through the things we do. But the things we do also matter greatly to God. And don’t ever let anyone tell you they don’t. Whenever faith is mentioned in the New Testament, it never ever

has to do with sitting back and being passive, it always has to do with doing. And so Jesus says “If you have the faith of a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree be uprooted and planted into the sea and it will be done for you.” He says to the woman who was hemorrhaging for twelve years who touched the fringe of his robe, “Daughter your faith has made you well. To the blind beggar in Jericho who called out to him saying “Son of David, have mercy on me.” He said “Receive your sight, your faith has healed you.” In Hebrews it says “It was by faith that Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain. By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By faith Abraham when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.” Faith in the bible is always a doing faith. You do not sit back on faith, you step out in faith. You do not take a nap of faith you take a leap of faith. You do not sit on the couch by faith you walk by faith. Being saved by grace through faith may mean there is nothing you can do to earn your salvation, but people who have faith do things.

You know, when you are a Christian and other people around you know you are a Christian, maybe you will be fortunate enough to find that one or two of them are interested in knowing a few things about your faith and so they ask you a few questions. And sometimes what you find is they ask you questions like “Do you have to do this or that to be a Christian?” And so people will say to you “Do you have to go to church to be a Christian?” And I always say, “No you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian, but Christians go to church. And no you don’t have to read your bible to be a Christian, but Christians read the bible and no, no you do not have to do acts of love and mercy and justice and hospitality to be a Christian. You don’t have to do anything at all. But Christians do acts of love, they do acts of mercy, they do acts of justice

and hospitality.” We may be saved through faith and not through the things we do, but faith that does not do is no faith at all.

Well, as we carry these three points with us, let us return to our original questions, the questions we asked as I began this sermon. Why does it matter so much to God if we believe that he exists? It is not belief that God exists that matters. It is belief in God, trust in God that matters. Belief that God exists is not enough. Is faith really more important than the things we do? No, but God’s grace is more important than the things we do, and that is what saves us. We are not saved by faith, we are saved by God’s grace through faith. And finally, if that is not enough, God never saves us through a passive faith, through a sitting back and relaxing faith, but through an active faith, a doing faith, as we take leaps of faith and step out in faith and walk in faith.