

June 7, 2026 - Trinity Episcopal Church - 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

Genesis 12:1

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.”

Matthew 9:9

“May we who have gathered
to share a preached word
from these ancient words
encounter a living word. Amen.”

(from Wilda Gafney)

That prayer that I just prayed is something I borrowed from the biblical scholar, Wil Gafney. I like the idea she’s expressing, that we’re here together to explore these 2000 and 6000 year old stories, not as dusty relics, but as words that can transcend time, that have something fresh to say to us today.

I also like how ‘word’ is repeated: *preached word, ancient words, living word*. It affirms the notion that words aren’t static, that they can change meaning over time, impacted by context, life experience, an evolving understanding of how the world works, along with peoples’ differing backgrounds and perspectives.

One of the words that's standing out to me today in our scriptures is the word "faith." In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes about Abraham (previously known as Abram) receiving God's promise of many descendants because of his faith. In the gospel, a hemorrhaging woman's health is restored, and a grieving father has his daughter brought back to life; both are commended for their faith in reaching out to Jesus for his help. And Matthew leaves his post at his tax collecting booth when Jesus tells him, "Follow me." The gospel writer doesn't explicitly use the word faith here, but it's certainly implied.

When people use the word *faith*, though, they often mean two very different things. Some folks think of faith as certainty, intellectual confidence. Having the right answers, no doubts, and a firm grip on what is true. Viewed this way, faith crowds out questions — there's no *need* for questions, because you already know what's right. Faith as certainty has its feet firmly planted. Sure, and stable.

For others, though, faith means trust. It's not so much about having everything all figured out, but more about who or what you lean on when you *don't* have stuff figured out. Faith as trust allows for ambiguity, for questions, for holding competing ideas and ideals in tension. Thinking this way, faith's aim isn't certainty, but commitment and relationship.

Faith as certainty sure sounds more grounded and secure than the more nebulous "trust." But certainty can be fragile, brittle. Because if your faith is grounded only in things you see as certain, then new information or

contradictory information or suffering can feel like threats, and doubt becomes an enemy.

I remember a class I took in seminary, called *The Atheist Critique of the Church*, in which we read books and articles by atheist scholars leveling criticisms against the Christian church, highlighting its flaws and contradictions and hypocrisies. Our professor was decidedly pro-Christian — he is both an Episcopal priest and a theologian — and he wasn't trying to recruit us to be atheists, but he thought that one way for the church to be better, more aligned with the teachings of Jesus, was to pay attention to where the “opposition” thought we were falling short.

One woman attending the class came from a different seminary across town, because she needed one more theology class to graduate and this one fit her schedule. She was about to be ordained in a pretty conservative denomination, knew nothing about the Episcopal church, and right from the start of the class, she was pretty freaked out. During a break that first day, she leaned over to ask me, referring to the professor, “Is this guy even a Christian?” She told me she'd bought the books for the class, but turned them around in her bookcase so the spines wouldn't face out, because she was afraid someone might see books by atheists on her shelf, and accuse her of losing her faith. My heart ached for how fearful she was.

The elders in her church, who were monitoring her studies, took issue with her choice of this odd-sounding seminary class — it didn't seem right to them — and they made her take the books back to the bookstore. She never read the assignments, didn't participate in the discussions; I'm not

sure if she even finished the class. The idea of asking questions of Christianity, of challenging its integrity, holding it accountable, came across to her (and her church elders) as being disloyal and undermining her faith — the faith-as-certainty kind of faith.

When we look at word origins and etymologies, we see that faith as certainty is a much more modern understanding.

The word “faith” has Proto-Indo-European roots, then makes its way into Latin as the words *fides* and *fidere*, meaning, to trust. The word “believe” is also etymologically tied to words meaning trust, and even love — like the word, “beloved.” (Believe / Beloved.) In the New Testament, the Greek word *pistis* gets translated as faith, but it, too, means trust and confidence. Eventually, though, the words faith and believe, morph into being about intellectual assent, likely as fallout from the arguments of the reformation, as Roman Catholics and Protestants worked to define themselves over and against each other — a boundary marker of identity, as in, what do you believe vs. what do we believe.

The faith we hear about in the stories of Abram and Matthew and the hemorrhaging woman and the man with the daughter... their faith is of that pre-reformation kind. Trust-faith.

Abram picks up and leaves the place he’s lived for so much of his life, because he trusts God. He feels a connection to God, has a relationship with God, and sometimes relationships ask things of you. God promises that Abram will become the patriarch of a great network of descendants, but

Abram can't know this for sure — intellectually, it makes no sense at all, given his and his wife's ages and their childless history. God doesn't explain how it's all going to work, doesn't write out a contract with guarantees and contingencies. God asks, Abram trusts.

In the story of the call of Matthew, no explanation is given for why Matthew abandons his tax-collector job — a position which offers him income, security, and status with the occupying Roman forces — all of which he gives up in order to follow this itinerant rabbi, Jesus, into an uncertain future with no guarantees. He's choosing to trust Jesus; he's not betting on a sure thing.

It's the same with the man with the daughter and the woman who's been suffering for 12 years...they choose to trust, vulnerably putting themselves into Jesus' hands, even though they're not certain of the outcome.

Faith as certainty hangs on tight, seeking control. Faith as trust lets go, practices surrender, commits to an unseen future. And it's through trust that Abram and Matthew and the man and his daughter and the long-suffering woman find their lives utterly transformed by gifts they could never have imagined.

I had a real-life encounter this week, where certainty and trust were major themes being played out, and which brought home to me the costs associated with vulnerability and trust, and the abiding truth that faith-as-trust is the only way forward. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Sarah (Thomas) and I attended a meeting this past Wednesday, organized by one of the members of the Santa Barbara clergy association. The clergy were invited to meet and have conversation with two higher ups — regional or district field operation managers, I think they were called — in the Immigration and Customs Enforcement organization, ICE.

The meeting organizer — our colleague Nicole, who's the pastor at a church in Goleta — Nicole articulated the purpose of the gathering this way: *“My hope for this meeting,” she said, “is not only to learn more about the people behind the agency and the realities of their work, but also to share openly and faithfully about what many of us are witnessing in our communities. As faith leaders, and people called to care for the vulnerable, many of us carry deep concerns about the treatment of immigrants and the impact current enforcement practices are having on families and neighborhoods. We have heard stories marked by fear, instability, trauma, and what many experience as unfair and inhumane treatment. We are concerned about what we see, and yet, we know meaningful dialogue about these issues matters. It is important to speak directly, to ask difficult questions honestly, and to advocate clearly for the dignity and humanity of every person. This meeting is intended to create space for respectful conversation, accountability, and deeper understanding.”*

That was the aim. And although I didn't expect to have my mind or my views radically *changed*, I was hoping to gain some insight, or have my assumptions complicated. I came into the room with some trepidation, but tried to trust, to stay open to an unseen future.

We gathered. We prayed. We agreed to some basic guidelines about speaking respectfully, assuming good intent, and seeking understanding. And then we heard what has become completely familiar rhetoric.

The ICE officials may well have been sincere — I can't know what is in their hearts — but what they offered was a closed narrative, a wall of certainty: *the law is the law; we are only doing our jobs; reports to the contrary are mistaken; criticism belongs elsewhere*. Every challenge we raised, every question we asked could be absorbed into that existing narrative. There was no apparent opening through which new information, contrary experiences, or the testimony of the people in the room could enter.

Certainty says, "How can I defend what I already know?" Trust asks, "What might I learn if I truly listen?"

I can't speak for all my clergy colleagues, but I believe we entered that room hoping for trust. Not agreement or conversion or victory, but trust: a willingness to let someone else's reality make a claim on us. I think we were prepared to hear things that challenged our assumptions. What was disheartening was coming face-to-face with the reality of how difficult it is to have a conversation when one side or another or both arrive convinced that they already have the whole story.

After the hour-long meeting, the officials left. Many of the clergy hung back a bit, anxious to do a little processing. *How was that for you? I didn't*

feel like your question got answered, did you? Some expressed the need or desire to engage in some sort of mind and soul cleansing ritual, because it was so hard to come face-to-face with that implacable wall of certainty. For those agents to have agreed to meet with 20 or so faith leaders in the community that they oversee, and then not have any genuine trust moment was profoundly sad and frustrating.

This interchange in the aftermath, that was the most hopeful part of the day. We came together as a diverse group — of Christians and Jews and Unitarians — and even though there are points of theology and social justice and politics on which we disagree or have a vast variety of viewpoints, we came together as a body because we were willing to come together and trust

Faith-as-trust made, for Abraham, descendants more numerous than he could count. Faith-as-trust gave Matthew a place in Jesus' inner circle, and a chance to spread the word of Jesus' love after his death and resurrection. Faith-as-trust gave a grieving father his daughter back, and it healed the hemorrhaging woman's 12 year battle.

I don't know if the time we spent with those immigration officials made any difference in their thinking at all. I don't know if our coming together and voicing our concerns and trying really hard to listen to those who operate in a system which doesn't honor the dignity and humanity of certain folks might make things better or maybe it will make them worse.

What I do know, though, is that the only spaciousness and glimmers of the possibility of a changed world showed up that day when people of

different and diverse religious ideologies practiced faith-as-trust and not faith-as-certainty. And it's the only way God's living word, through ancient words and modern ones, will ever make its way to us. *Amen.*