

## “At the End of the Day: How Do You ‘Get’ Faith?” Rev. Perry J. Fruhling, St. Mark’s Lutheran, 9-3-06

Grace to you and peace...What a great day yesterday was for our church...36 of our confirmation students standing before the congregation and sharing their statements of faith...and as was evidenced in the words they used to share their convictions...they “get” faith...they’ve got it...Today we draw to a close our sermon series on tough questions entitled, “At the End of the Day.” We’ve dealt with such issues as doubt, sin, and shame, tragedies, war, and finally, today, the issue of faith...how DO we ‘get’ it...how does it happen? For the rationalist...truth is only that which can be seen or demonstrated...for the New Age philosophy, it’s the opposite...irrationality...dive into the darkness...as Christians we accept neither of those as truth...but something deeper, more meaningful on both accounts...as the Bible says in Hebrews 11:1 – “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for...and the conviction of things not seen.” Faith both puts trust in something that goes beyond the naked eye and has answer to the darkness of this world. It IS often defined by present uncertainty and trouble...connecting us in the midst of insecurity to the assurance of a hope in Jesus Christ. Faith, in and of itself, cannot save us...but it brings us to the one who can save us...it’s like the ambulance or paramedics...if a person is dying from a wound or illness, the ambulance cannot save you, but carries you to the hospital while the paramedics perform procedures to keep you going until you get to the hospital...but it is ultimately to bring you to a doctor and medical staff who can perform operations which can save the life. Faith is the vehicle which brings us to Christ who can save us. But how do we ‘get’ that?

1) Acknowledge the Gift...Faith is a gift...first, we need to acknowledge it as that...Ephesians 2:8 says, “By grace you were saved through faith...this is not your own doing...it is a gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one should boast about it.” At the end of the day, you don’t “get” faith, it’s given to you! Martin Luther in the 3<sup>rd</sup> article of the Apostles Creed says, “I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort, believe in Jesus Christ or come to him, but the Holy Spirit, has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith.”

As a child we received gifts from our parents on birthdays, at Christmas, and other special occasions with no strings attached. They were given because the parent was in love with the child...not the other way around. We have given our children gifts because we want them to feel loved, cherished. As a child, I haven’t always loved my parents in return for the gifts they given...and it’s even been far into adulthood before I’ve discovered some of the gifts they’ve given and been able to appreciate them...the reality is that my parents still love me despite my lack of appreciation and never stop loving me despite my inability to respond at times. So it is with God’s love...God has given us his love, his gift of forgiveness and grace before we were ever able to respond to it. And despite the fact that we’ve not yet come to appreciate it fully, it doesn’t make God love us any less...his desire is for us to recognize the gift and begin to love as he loves...the difficulty is for us with this first issue of faith is that we want to think that there is something we have to do...we need to earn the gift...act in a certain way to validate the gift...

A couple of weeks ago we were visiting my parents when the doorbell rang...one of our kids ran to get it and came back reporting that there was someone standing at the door with a Bible...although I was slow to leave the game that we were playing, I got this sort of pumping of blood going as I came out the front door to meet a 17-year-old with his 12 year-old sister in tow...wanting to share tracts from the Jehovah’s Witnesses...poor fellow...didn’t realize that he was going to be blind-sided by a Christian theologian...without revealing that I was a pastor, I listened for a while to his presentation about his beliefs...but then finally had to ask him how we get to heaven...every attempt to answer came down to living according to a set of rules, as they defined them, by following Christ. I asked about what Jesus had done on the cross...“that was important, but all to get us to follow him and live your life this way...” It sounded so good and innocent...how could I disagree that God wanted me to live a life worthy of his son...but then the verse came to me that I repeated to the young man over and over again...“by grace you are saved through faith...this is not your own doing, but a gift of God.” I asked him to consider just that verse...and that the Bible would not contradict itself...after a while a car door opened, and a woman appeared...his mom...saying it was time to go...“why,” he asked...“cause we have to be somewhere.” In our culture, it is a do-it-yourself, Bob Vila, sort of world, where we want to fix it on our own...but Scripture is clear that God has already done it, already fixed the problem of sin, by sending Jesus...it is a gift to you...

2) If faith is a gift, how do WE get it? The gift is given to everyone...we receive it through believing in him. John 3:16 makes it simple...“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” To get faith, you Believe in God’s promises. The Bible says in Mark 16:16, “whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved” and again in Acts 16:31 it says, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.”

It begins with confessing that you need a savior...that you have sinned and fallen short of God’s standard for living...simply to say I have sinned and I need a savior...believing in Jesus, means that I have to believe that in and of myself, I’m not enough...that I lack worthiness to stand before God alone as the unclean sinner that I am. Once we recognize who we are and confess that we have separated ourselves from God through sin...then we simply accept Jesus’ forgiveness...

John 1:12 says, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” We get faith by confessing that I can’t do it, and that through Christ God has already done it. I believe in his power to forgive my sins.

This is Confirmation weekend at St. Mark's. Yesterday 36 students proclaimed their faith publicly for Christ. My daughter, Chantal was one of them. I never like to play favorites, but let me read a sentence or two from her faith statement (which reflects what our students in general were able to confess publicly as they read their statements): "This is what I believe...that God, our eternal Father gave us life and gave us meaning in our life. I believe in Jesus who came to earth to tell us about God who loves us very much and forgives us for all of our sins by dying on the cross. I have learned that I do not follow what Christ asks me to do and I fail to follow him, but that God forgives me by saying that his Son's death on the cross paid in full for my sins."

In Confirmation, our students express to God and the community of faith what they believe. It's a public profession of faith...Scripture calls for this in Romans 10:9, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." It's a time where we tell God, I love you back. And I, for one, was as excited as a parent can be over the salvation of a daughter yesterday!

3) To get faith trust his Lordship. Theologian Paul Tillich said "Faith is clasping the hand that has first clasped ours." Faith is a journey...it is a walk with Christ. "Faith walk" implies that two people are walking together. In the book of Genesis, Abraham is asked to follow God to a new land with great promises that he would have a great name and have many descendants. **Genesis 15:6 says, "Abraham believed the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."** Abraham got up and left the land he was living in and followed God. He trusted that God was leading him to a place and could do what he promised. His belief

was not just a head trip...he trusted the Lordship of God for his life. Again it's not a matter of doing something, but trusting what God wants to do in our lives.

Have you ever heard about the guy who walked a tight rope across Niagra Falls? Many people watched him do it. To them he asked, "Do you believe I can walk a tight rope across the Falls?" They all replied, "Yes." They had already seen him do it. Then he pushed a wheel barrow on a tight rope across Niagra Falls. When he completed the feat, he asked the onlookers, "Do you believe I can walk a tight rope across the Falls pushing a wheel barrow?" To that they replied unanimously, "Yes." Because they saw him do that too. Finally, a buddy of the tight rope walker climbs into the wheel barrow and the tight rope walker pushes him across the Falls. Wow, what a daring feat! When they finished, the tight rope walker asked the crowd, "Do you believe I can walk a tight rope across the Falls pushing a wheel barrow with a person in it?" To that they exclaimed, "Yes!" For they were now believers in this guy's awesome abilities. Then he looked at the crowd and asked, "Who's next?"

Ultimately faith is trusting that God can take us to the place where we cannot go ourselves. It is trusting our lives into God's hands bring me across Jordan to the Promised Land...to heaven's gates...trusting, as Abraham did, that the move to a better country, a heavenly one...is all by God's grace...Hebrews 11 (where we began today) speaks of people of faith like Abraham and other Old Testament people of faith who trusted God...(verse 16) "they desire a better country, a heavenly one...therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God."

Yesterday, after the confirmation students read their faith statements, I read a children's book to them that I had read many times for my daughter when she was a child...(Cover)called "Guess How Much I Love You." Let me share it with you now...

**Slide 2** Little Nutbrown Hare, who was going to bed, held on tight to Big Nutbrown Hare's very long ears. **3** He wanted to be sure that Big Nutbrown Hare was listening. "Guess how much I love you," he said. "Oh, I don't think I could guess that." said Big Nutbrown Hare. **4** "This much," said Little Nutbrown Hare, stretching out his arms as wide as they could go. **5** Big Nutbrown Hare had even longer arms. "But I love you this much," he said. *Hmm, that is a lot,* thought Little Nutbrown Hare. **6** "I love you as high as I can reach," said Little Nutbrown Hare. **7** "I love you as high as I can reach," said Big Nutbrown Hare. *That is very high,* thought Little Nutbrown Hare. *I wish I had arms like that.* **8** Then Little Nutbrown Hare had a good idea. He tumbled upside down and reached up the tree trunk with his feet. "I love you all the way up to my toes!" he said. **9** "And I love you all the way up to your toes," said Big Nutbrown Hare, swinging him up over his head. **10** "I love you as high as I can hop!" laughed Little Nutbrown Hare, bouncing up and down. **11** But I love you as high as I can hop," smiled Big Nutbrown Hare – and he hopped so high that his ears touched the branches above. *That's good hopping* thought Little Nutbrown Hare. *I wish I could hop like that.* **12** "I love you all the way down the lane as far as the river," cried Little Nutbrown Hare. "I love you across the river and over the hills," said Big Nutbrown Hare. **13** *That's very far,* thought Little Nutbrown Hare. He was almost too sleepy to think anymore. Then he looked beyond the thornbushes, out into the big dark night. Nothing could be further than the sky. **14** "I love you right up to the moon," he said, and closed his eyes. "Oh, that's far," said Big Nutbrown Hare. "That's very, very far." **15** Big Nutbrown Hare settled Little Nutbrown Hare into his bed of leaves. He leaned over and kissed him good night. **16** Then he lay down close by and whispered with a smile, "I love you right up to the moon – and back."

I hope that you discover in your attempts to tell God you love him...to accept his gift, believe in his love and trust his Lordship...that you can never out love or out give God. His love is first...it is what saves you. Your trust in him is simply trust in the grace, the unconditional love to love you all your days...amen.