

" Faith, a Basic Family Value!"

Luke 17:11-19
May 2, 2010

Joshua 24:8-15
St. James UCC

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Today we are looking at one of the most basic of all values - faith. Like other values, faith is often learned in our families. When faith is valued in our families, then it becomes the foundation upon which our lives are built. Faith provides the guidance and structure for all that we do with our lives. The reality is that most people either "catch the faith" because their family is committed to living as Christians, or they fail to "catch the faith", because faith was just never a priority in their family's life.

The example that we set as parents, and the kind of life that we live together as a family, is critically important to our children's faith. If we are serious about our faith commitment, they will know that, and the most likely response on their part will be to take their own faith commitment seriously. On the other hand, if we are not serious about our faith commitment, or if we worship only for the sake of our children or when we have nothing better to do, or if we come to church but leave our faith behind as soon as we walk out the door, then our children will know that we don't really take our faith commitment seriously, and the most likely response on their part will be to not take their faith commitment seriously either. As we near the end of another church school year, please reflect and pray about this important issue dealing with the faith that you will pass on to your family.

In our text from Joshua, Joshua had gathered together the leaders from all of the tribes of Israel at a place called Shechem. There, as the Bible says, "they came into the presence of God." Through Joshua God spoke to them and reminded them that all that they had had been given to them by God. It was God who had led them out of slavery in Egypt. It was God who led them through the desert. As they encountered hostile people, God gave them victory, and indeed God gave them this new land, this promised land, a land that they had not earned, but which was a special gift from God.

When you think about it, in many ways those same words could be spoken to us. Oh yes, we weren't enslaved in Egypt. We weren't there on the Exodus, in fact for most of us our families have lived in this country for several or perhaps many generations. But, it is still God who has created us. It is God who has given us the gift of all of our talents and abilities. It is God who provides challenges and opportunities. When you really think about it, all that we have is a gift from God - just like it was for the Israelite people.

It is in that context that Joshua talks with the people about their faith commitment, and who it is that they will chose to serve. Joshua's challenge to the people concludes with his own declaration of faith - "As for my family and me, we will serve the Lord".

In the Israelite nation faith was clearly understood to be a family value. They were a part of a faith community, and entrance into that community came through the family. We find that understanding in Joshua's statement to the tribes of Israel who were gathered there at Shechem, 'but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord'. This is a declaration that entrance into the covenant with God was a matter for each family to decide. As a family, they would decide to enter the covenant with God - or not, but if they entered into that covenant, it would be lived out and passed on from generation to generation through the family. For those families who entered the covenant, the whole of the family was included, and the actions of all of them were bound by that covenant. Faith was understood to be a family value, a value that was to be held and reflected in the lives of the whole family.

It was also the responsibility of the family to pass on their faith to the next generation, to share the story of their faith, for in that sharing a sense of identity was given to each member of the family. Who are we? We are a part of a family who believes in and follows God. We are a part of God's family. We are a family who lives in covenant with God, and that means that we worship, we pray, we give thanks, and we seek to follow God's will in the ways that we live.

There's a story about a construction crew that was laying a drain line as part of a new building project. While they were excavating, the workmen uncovered a power cable directly in their path. The foreman called the electrician who was wiring the new building. The electrician looked at the cable and assured the foreman that the cable was dead. "Just cut it out of your way." He said. "Are you sure that there's no danger?" The foreman asked. "Absolutely", was the reply. Then the foreman asked, "Well, then, will you cut the cable for us?" The electrician hesitated a moment, and with a slight smile said, "Well, I'm not that sure."

Unfortunately, that's sometimes the kind of faith that we have. When it's easy and convenient, we are devout Christians, but when we really have to make a commitment, when we have to put our lives on the line, by changing the way that we live, by following "God when it's not easy or popular or convenient, then we find out how sure we are in our convictions.

In our passage from the gospel of Luke we find ten men who suffered from a dreaded skin disease. Now in the time of Jesus, leprosy was a real problem. There was no cure for it, and no known way to stop the spread of the disease, except to avoid people who had it, and anything that they touched. So, the policy in Israel, was to exclude lepers from the community. They lived apart from their families and friends in the company of other lepers. If someone who was healthy inadvertently came near, it was their responsibility to call out to that person, warning them not to come any closer. In addition, many skin diseases that were not really leprosy were diagnosed as such, causing those people to also be banished from their communities.

We need to understand that reality, to get a sense of the desperation of those ten men who stood at a distance from Jesus and shouted, "Jesus! Master! Have pity on us!" Their lives had been shattered by the cruelty of this disease. They have

had to leave their homes and families, and even their livelihood, to exist in a community of the sick, where they are totally dependent upon the charity of others.

Jesus tells these ten men to go and let the priests examine them, for the priests were the only ones in the community who could declare that someone was now free from the disease of leprosy, and therefore able to be welcomed back into the life of the community.

On the way there we are told that they were made clean. The miraculous, the impossible, the hoped for has happened. Their lives are turned back around. There is nothing that they have wanted more. Nine of them joyously rush on to the priests, eager to be declared clean, eager to return to their families, but there is one out of the ten, only one, who returns and thanks Jesus for this miracle.

It's so easy to be like the other nine. It's so easy to go through life taking things for granted. It's so easy to assume that we ought to have plenty of food to eat, good clothes to wear, a nice home to live in, and so much more. It's so easy to think that all of these things have happened by our own efforts, because our efforts have played a part in that process. It's so easy to forget that we wouldn't have anything, we wouldn't even be - if God hadn't given us the gift of life, and if God hadn't given us particular talents and abilities that we have the opportunity to use and develop in the living of our lives. It's so easy to go through life without really thanking God for all that we have received. It's so easy to approach life like a child at Christmas time, a child who rushes eagerly from one present to the next while never really appreciating any of them, a child who is so eager to play with all of the toys that he forgets to give thanks, and often forgets who it was that even gave the gift.

That's how nine of the men responded to their healing. They were so eager to rush off and enjoy the benefits of the gift that they forgot to even thank the giver.

But, there was one who returned. There was one who stopped to say thank you. And Jesus said to him, "Get up and go; your faith has made you well." You see there was a second healing that took place that day. The first healing was a physical healing and was shared by all ten, but the second was spiritual and was shared by only the one who was thankful. All of the pain that he carried - the pain that came from his own sinfulness, his anger, his fear, his discouragement, all of that and more was healed because of his faith. He truly went forth that day a different person on the inside as well as on the outside.

That kind of difference comes from faith that is at the center of our lives. It is the foundation that shapes how we live, instead of being something that we do when it's convenient, and ignore when it's not. Christ came both to challenge and to change us. When we live lives of faith, then we never really know what lies ahead, for it is God who is our guide, God who sets the agenda, but at the same time we do know that we don't travel this journey alone, for God is with us each and every step of the way.

Amen.