

Scriptures

John 6:28-51

²⁸ Then they (some of the Jews who were part of the 5000 fed by Jesus who followed him across the lake) said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰ So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³² Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which^l comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; ³⁸ for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me; that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ This is indeed the will of my Father; that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

⁴¹ Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴² They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" ⁴³ Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

This is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Living Faith Chapter 6

[6.1.1]

Faith is a gift of God,
Constantly renewed in Word and Sacrament,
And in the shared life of God's people.

It is trust in God,
Involves personal repentance of sin,
Acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour,
And commitment to him as Lord.

It includes assent to the truth of the Gospel.

By faith we receive the very life of God into our lives and joyfully discover that God knows, loves, and pardons us.

[6.1.3]

Faith is a response to God's presence in the midst of life.
It says yes to the God who is here.

Sermon: What is the church part II – Faith vs. Religion

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Last week I spoke about the anxiety that is in many churches today. The face of the church in North America is changing and that causes some of us to be fearful. We no longer enjoy a cultural dominance, we are no longer a Christian nation – we are a nation with Christians in it.

However, as I mentioned last week, I don't think fear is the proper response to this change. In fact – the fear seems to be pretty misplaced. We certainly don't need to defend God against an apathetic culture. God will do just fine. The fear is about the church and her place in society, and by extension us and our place in society.

The simple truth is that all things pass away. Everything is subject to change, and that includes the way we do church. God's church has taken many forms in different times and cultures – our church would seem very peculiar to men and women from the time of St. Antony, and would seem just as peculiar to the Iraqi Christians who are being persecuted right now. There is more than one way to do church, our North American religious institutional church is not the pinnacle; it is not the final say in the matter.

Fear is also not the correct reaction to a declining church because as we saw last week, at the end is where we find a new beginning. It is only when a kernel of wheat falls to the ground that 30, 60 or 100 more are produced. It is only when Jesus dies that the resurrection becomes possible. God is always doing something new. The Christian response to the decline of mainstream churches should be to look with hope for the new growth – to find what God is doing and get on board.

This can be a little scary – the unknown usually is – but as I heard at a recent conference 'change is inevitable; the only choice we have is whether we are agents of change, or victims of it.' This week I would like to prepare and encourage us as we look for God's plan for our congregation by returning to the heart of everything we hold dear, the heart of what keeps us going as God's people. Our subject is the Christian hope found in Christ.

Psalms 127 asks 'I look to the hills, from where does my hope come?' Where do we get hope from? What's the basis for it?

Christianity is unique among most world religions is that it is very future oriented. It may not seem that way sometimes – as I look around I see all the things from the past that we treasure. Our Bible, the architecture, stained glass, the organ – even the event of the cross is a historical thing. We certainly value the past don't we? We point to events that happened thousands of years ago, and they are as real to us as the pews we sit in right now.

But, even though we look to the past as our foundation and we worship the God of our ancestors, we aren't a backwards looking people – we are a future looking people. Before Judaism, people thought of time in a cyclical fashion: seasons come and go, rulers come and go, people come and go. Things are as they ever were and ever shall be.

But then we are introduced to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Moses – this God is eternal, but not cyclical. This God speaks of beginnings and ends. This God creates, and will one day reconcile all things to himself. He brought his people out of slavery in Egypt into freedom in a promised land. He continues to bring his people from bondage to sin into a new life of liberation. Life with God has direction – it has purpose.

God is leading us into the future, into reconciliation with himself and with each other. God is not looking back, but is looking forward to the completion of his kingdom, where we ourselves will be complete.

But despite the fact that we follow a future oriented God, we seem to often get locked in the past. We aren't looking for what God is doing now, but rather we look back to what he has done long ago. How can we think that our creative God is done with us, that we have come this far and that now we must keep everything the same and cease to grow?

It reminds me of the living room at home when I was a child. Nobody was allowed to go into it, we didn't play there, didn't even walk through it – it was kept for only those one or two days a year when 'special people' came over. The very name of the room made no sense – it was a living room in which no living beings were allowed. We as a congregation are a living being; we are not a museum showcase that must remain the way it is – forever. We are not in heaven yet, that means that we are not done growing – we are not done changing – we are continuing to journey with and toward God.

How sad it would be to think that we've hit our peak, that the church hit Christian perfection 100 years ago and that we need to return to those days. How depressing to think that this is the final destination and status that God planned for us. Ever know someone who had their peak in high school, or earlier? Everything is about that one long past moment of glory. There is no life in the present, only memory.

But that is not an attitude of faith. Faith at its core is a wild hope for the future. It's the knowledge that no matter what we have accomplished so far, and no matter how things look now, that there are even better days to come. God is in control, and he's moving towards something incredible.

One of the main reasons that we forget that we are moving into a hopeful future, and instead get stuck in the past, is because of religion. I think it's very important for us to understand the difference between religion and faith. They are not the same thing.

Religion – I've found two sources of where the word comes from and what it means. Augustine used the Latin word *religio*, where *re* means again, and *ligare* – think ligament or ligature, which means to bind. The other suggested source for the word is *religio* meaning to rule, or measure. Either way, religion means to bind or rule – it is something that limits. Our modern definition of religion is 'a particular system of faith and worship.' A system. Rules. Limits. Boundaries.

Now, religion itself isn't bad; religion is quite necessary. For us to communicate our faith and pass it on to others we need certain disciplines. We need our scriptures which bear witness to our foundation, our revelation of what God has done for his people, and the revelation of Jesus. We need to learn how to pray, and to listen. We need to worship together and come near to God as a people. We need to learn to serve others with our time and our money. Religion makes the rules and guidelines that are the practical expression and transmission of our faith.

If we want to journey toward God together, with our children and neighbours; if we want to travel in community as our three-in-one God lives in community, then the rules and discipline of religion serve a purpose, and a critical purpose at that.

But religion alone can't save anyone. Following the rules won't bring you to Christ. Only faith can do that. Only faith will allow God to make you new. That's because religion is man-made, while faith is God given. So we don't want to be only a religious people; we want to be a people of faith, because it is faith that leads to life and hope.

Faith and religion go together – religion without faith is an empty set of rules; it doesn't know justice, it doesn't know love. Faith without religion loves and trusts and means well, but can easily fall into chaos and confusion. We need to understand the role of each one. It's not a far stretch to compare religion to the body and faith to the spirit. Religion is the physical, the practical. Faith belongs to the spirit.

We need religion in the same way that we need bodies; we need the solid practicality of physical matter. But the body should be under the control of the spirit, not the other way around. A spirit ruled by the body is susceptible to desire, greed, anger – the spirit ruled by the body is subject to corruption in the very same way that a faith ruled by religion is subject to corruption.

But, when the body is brought under the control of the Spirit, the body becomes an instrument of God doing the work of God since it is the spirit that communicates with God. Religion is necessary, but needs to be guided by faith. Faith is always number one.

The reason is simple really. Religion looks back into the past. Religion is carved in stone. Religion is used to justify power and limit freedom through rules.

Religion seeks to freeze time – to create a snapshot of the way things should be, and never allow it to change. The problem with that is that God is not done creating yet. God didn't create everything then sit back and say 'it is finished.' Creation of the universe takes up only the first two pages of the 1200 page Bible. God continues to create, to guide, to do new things. He is creating you anew right now. And he isn't locked into one procedure, he doesn't just do the same thing over and over.

Joshua took Jericho by marching everyone around it with the Ark, blowing trumpets and shouting. But later God instructed Gideon to leave almost everyone at home and go fight with some clay pots. When God instructed Gideon, Gideon respond by saying 'No God, that's not the way things are done; we'll take everyone and some trumpets and do it like Joshua.' No – Gideon followed God's plan and did something new. Each victory was different. God had the Israelites use spies, sometimes they just attacked until they won, another time they attacked and ran away to draw their enemies out of the city. Each time God had a different strategy for victory for his people. God is not stuck in the past, so neither should we be. This is why an active relationship with God is so critical.

Religious thinking is static, faithful listening is forward looking. Faith is open to new forms of expression. Faith sets people free to live a godly life.

We see faith and religion come into conflict in this morning's reading. Jesus says 'I am the Bread of life.' But some of those gathered there say 'we have known this Jesus since he was a child, how could he have come down from heaven?' Jesus was a known person, some of the people there would have known him as a youth, or known his parents. Jesus may have even worked in their houses with his father building cabinets. Jesus is just too common to be holy. People had their minds made up about him already.

Could we suffer from the same problem in church? Our worship – the hymns we sing, the prayers we pray, the rituals, sacraments, sermons, creeds – have they become so common place that we are unable to see the glory and divinity of Jesus, the son of God made flesh and walking among us? Are we letting our religion bind our faith, rather than allowing our faith lead our religion?

When we witness the decline of the church in North America and Europe, what we are really seeing is a change in religious expression. It's the outward forms – the buildings, the hierarchies of authority, the cultural influence – the way we dress, the way we worship, the way we preach, the songs we sing. These are the things that are changing – the outward form of our religion is changing, but not our faith. The body of the church is changing, but not her spirit.

Faith is central; it is in fact faith that saves, not religion, so we have little cause to fear. Our God is a God who is constantly creating, who is making new things, doing new things; who does things that we don't understand, but that are for our benefit. Our faith in our creative God is what gives us hope. Our faith allows us to distinguish between what God is doing with his church, and what the world is doing to the church. Instead of fretting about what we see as decline, we should be looking for the new growth, finding the new thing that God is doing and getting on board.

This is not a fearful time for the church – this is an exciting time. We're in for an adventure; what we need now is not to cling to the form of what was, but learn to cling to God, our rock and our redeemer – the perfecter of our faith.