

As winter approached one year, a teacher asked her class what they believed about the holidays. In response, one little girl said, *“I believe in EVERYTHING!”* Confused, the teacher asked, *“what do you mean you believe in EVERYTHING?”* *“Well,”* the girl said, *“my mother is Catholic and my father is Jewish. So I believe in Jesus, and Moses, and the 12 tribes, and the 12 apostles, and Snow White and Aladdin. You know EVERYTHING!”*

The perspective of that girl is not unusual. In our modern world, there are people who believe in everything. Such people believe in Moses, and Jesus, and Mohammed, and Buddha - in some cases all at the same time. For such people it doesn't matter WHAT you believe, as long as you believe in something. Other people believe in such a narrow-minded way they can - as one comic put it - *“see through a keyhole with both eyes.”* For these people, you either believe in every pixel of how they picture God, or you can't be a person of faith, as they think their vision of God is the only one that is correct. So, if true faith isn't represented by either of these two extremes, what does it mean to say *“I have faith?”*

FIRST, if we say we have faith it means we believe that God exists, instead of being an atheist or an agnostic. This type of belief is not open-ended, however, allowing us to believe just anything about God, but not so specific we *“see through a keyhole with both eyes.”* As saints who have gone before us have learned, this type of belief begins with what we are told in the stories of creation in the book of Genesis, runs through what we read about the coming of Jesus in the gospels, and ends in what John tells us in the book of Revelation about the world to come. This is because sincerity alone is not enough. Sincerity will not overcome inaccuracy. One can be sincere and still be wrong. This means that being a person of faith not only means believing in a Diving Being, but also believing in the right being, and the right things about that being.

We see this in the story of a boy sitting on the porch with his grandmother at sunset. The grandmother pointed out what a lovely picture God had just painted. The boy replied, saying, *“and He did it with His left hand!”* *“His left hand?”* his grandmother asked, *“what do you mean He painted it with his left hand?”* *“Well,”* the boy said, *“we learned in Sunday School that Jesus sits on the right hand of God. So, God must have used his left hand to paint the sunset.”*

When we Christians talk about having faith in God, we are specifically speaking about the God Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob followed, the God who went before Israel in the pillar of fire and smoke, and the God whom the Apostle John tells us *“became flesh and dwelt among us,”* so that He could *“lay down His life for us.”* For this is the One who, *“when the fullness of time had come,”* took on flesh to show what He is like by enabling all who would respond the opportunity to be His spiritual children through FAITH.

This is the God, however, who is worshiped by Catholics and Protestants alike, the same God who is worshiped by Baptists and Methodists, Presbyterians and Lutherans, and a host of other Christians throughout the world who have no official grouping to which their church belongs. For while they have all kinds of differences in secondary beliefs, they are one in Christ because they share a set of basic beliefs in the God who manifested Himself in Jesus, sent His Holy Spirit into the world, and

continues to speak through the revelation we call the Bible. If that were all there is to having Christian faith, following God would be easy. Unfortunately, this is not the full picture of what it means to have faith.

If we say we have faith, the SECOND thing it means is that we seek to have our belief in God influence how we live. Christian faith is primarily about a relationship, and not a set of mental acknowledgments. This means true faith involves a way of living, and not just a set of facts to be memorized. It also means that true faith is intended by God to provide us with a means by which He can remold us into beings that resemble Him, and not just a creedal statement for us to recite each time we gather to worship. We see this in the book of James. In chapter 2, verse 19, the Apostle writes “*you believe there is only one God? You do well. But know this, even the demons believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize that faith without works is useless?*”

We see this in the story of new student who was asked by his teacher to tell a bit about his family as a self-introduction to the class. He thought for a second, and then said that his father is a Methodist preacher, as was his grandfather, and great-grandfather. In response, the teacher asked if he also was a Methodist. “*Yes,*” the boy said, “*I guess it just runs in the family.*” Faith does not run in the family. Faith is not a family tradition. Faith is a personal experience of God, an individual encounter of a finite being with an infinite God. For this reason, faith cannot be handed down like a family heirloom, but must be discovered and accepted for oneself.

This is why Paul says the things he does in Romans. In those verses, Paul said that having faith in Jesus involves two things: believing the right things about the right God, and seeking to allow those beliefs to transform how one behaves. Neither of those aspects can be neglected. For unless we believe in our hearts, Paul says, that Jesus was “*raised from the dead,*” which is a subtle reference to the entire corpus of Christian teaching referred to in the Bible as “the faith,” we cannot experience what he calls “*justification.*” And unless we act on our beliefs, “*and confess with our lips,*” by which he means fully living out the Christian life, we cannot be saved.

The reason, which we see again in James, is that “*anyone, then who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.*” For faith, according to Paul and James, involves not only understanding God, but also actual involvement with God in allowing Him to save us through the holy ways we choose to live in response to the things we say we believe. But even at that point, we have not come to the fulness of what it means to say “*I have faith.*”

If we say we have faith it means LASTLY that we seek to introduce other people to God. This is why, after saying the things he does about believing and confessing, Paul goes on to something which might at first appear to be a new topic: proclaiming the gospel. But, according to Paul, it is related because it is the third aspect of having faith. Jesus died on the cross and rose again so ALL His Father’s children might be reconciled. This means that when we become a Christian we do not just become recipients of the justification and salvation He offers. We also become ambassadors for the kingdom of God. This is because we are the only messengers there are for God’s kingdom. God does not have paid staff to do the work of the kingdom. Nor does God do His work in people’s lives

magically. Paul says God works in this world by revealing Himself to His people, and then enabling His people to tell others about Him.

That is why we say the things we do in our mission statement. Turn with me to the cover of your bulletin. Say with me the words printed at the bottom of the page: *“the purpose of Christ United Methodist Church is to introduce people to Jesus Christ, to help them become faithful followers of Him, and to equip them to share His love with others.”*

Those words are in bold italic print because God not only places the Holy Spirit in our lives so we can become the kinds of beings He created us to be, but also to give us the power we need to be on the front lines of mission and ministry. We see this when we pay attention to the verbs in that mission statement: INTRODUCE, HELP, EQUIP. For those three actions are what is needed if we are going to fully get to the place that we can honestly say *“I have saintly faith.”*

One of our members learned this last week. Last week was the last topic in our worship series on the “Five Things God Uses to Grow our Faith.” As we worshiped last week, we learned that God uses “pivotal circumstances” to grow our faith. But since God doesn’t want to stop with us, He used someone who left worship here last week to reach someone else in fulfillment of what Paul was talking about when he said *“how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”* After our member left here, they headed to the airport. As they took the shuttle from the parking lot to the terminal, they chatted with the shuttle driver. When they arrived at the terminal, the shuttle driver asked them to stay for a moment. When everyone else was gone, the driver poured out a tale of pain and sorrow, and then asked our member to pray for them.

So what does it mean to say *“I have saintly faith?”* It means that we seek each day to more fully come to know the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It means that we seek each day to apply what we learn to the way we live. And it means that we seek each day to be a tool by which God can fix the ills of the world around us. For that is how God created us to live: growing in our knowledge of Him, growing in how we live out that knowledge, and growing in our ability to share that knowledge with others. Living in such a way is not easy, however. In fact, it is impossible. We see this earlier in the book of Romans.

In Romans 7, Paul writes that *“nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will to do what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”* He then ponders that reality, and states *“so if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.”* And after taking a deep breath, Paul then says *“wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”* Fortunately, Paul then takes another deep breath, and writes *“thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

He writes those last words because there is a solution to our problem. There is a way that we can truly have the “saintly faith” we need to rise up each day and seek to grow in our knowledge of God, grow in living out that knowledge, and grow in sharing that knowledge with others. That way is

through the grace of God. For through His grace, God offers us the power we need to overcome sin. Through His grace, God offers us the power we need to “*seek first His kingdom and His righteousness,*” as Jesus called us to do. And through His grace, God offers us the power we need to be a channel through which He can offer His grace to other people. When we allow God’s grace to work in us in that way, it can look pretty miraculous however.

We see this in the story of a Catholic nun whose car ran out of gas. She walked to the nearest gas station to get help, but they didn’t have a gas can to sell her. Spying a bed pan in the corner of the office that they were using to catch a roof leak when it rained, the nun asked if she could borrow that to carry enough gas back to her car to get her to the station. The clerk agreed, put a gallon of gas in it, and watched her head off down the road. When she got to her she took off the gas cap, and began to carefully pour in the gas. As she was doing so, a man drove past. He stopped, backed up, rolled down his window, and said “*Sister, I wish that I had your faith!*”