
HOW TO HAVE A STRONGER FAITH

There's a lot of good stuff in this gospel reading:

- stuff about calling the sinful, and gathering with sinners, and healing, and raising from the dead.
- But I was intrigued this week with the story of Abraham in Paul's letter to the Romans.
 - Abraham and his faith to up and leave his homeland and travel to a new and foreign land, just because of the voice in his head.
 - And thinking about Abraham led me to think about how we might develop a stronger faith, not, perhaps to the degree that Abraham had,
 - but couldn't we all do with a little more faith in our lives?

When our first daughter, Talitha, was three, I played a little game with her.

- It probably wasn't very nice, but it did reveal something quite interesting to me about faith and trust.

I was in the bathroom one morning, trimming my beard, when Talitha walked in.

- "Daddy, are you shaving?" she asked.
 - I turned off the electric razor and answered, "No, I'm still asleep in bed."
- "No, you're not," Talitha said. "You're shaving."
 - "No," I insisted, "I'm not. I'm still sleeping in bed. You go and look."
 - And off she went.

What I discovered was the remarkable trust and faith present in children.

Pastor John Braaten tells how his three-year-old son, Jeff, loved to jump from the clothesline pole into his father's arms.

- Each time the boy would cry, "Again!"
 - Over and over, they would do this activity until the father's arms grew weary.

Then a friend came by, four inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than Pastor Braaten.

- "Andy," asked John, "would you catch Jeff for a while?"
 - "Sure," he responded, but Jeff would not jump to Andy.
- "Don't you see how much bigger Andy is than I am?" the father asked.
 - Jeff nodded.
- "Don't you think he can catch you?"
 - Again, Jeff nodded.
- "Then jump!"
 - Jeff shook his head, pointed at his father, and said, "You!"
- Exasperated, Pastor Braaten said, "Okay, come on."
 - Immediately, Jeff leaped into space and into his father's waiting arms.
- Andy *could* catch him, but Jeff knew his father *would* catch him.
 - That's faith rooted in trust.

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul talks about the faith of Abraham.

- Abraham's faith was a childlike faith.
- Even though the chances of the things that GOD had promised Abraham seemed slim at best,
 - still Abraham believed and hoped that GOD'S word to him was true.
 - His childlike faith operated out of a basic trust and love for GOD.

Abraham did not weaken in faith.

- I wonder why? So often, my faith does weaken...

Abraham grew strong in faith.

- I wonder how? I'd like to have a stronger faith...

Abraham grew stronger in faith as he faced up to a fundamental test:

- the test of the unknown.
 - Faith grows stronger as it comes to understand, accept, and enter into the GOD-given tests of the unknown.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read these words:

- *By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8)*

GOD promised Abraham an unknown land all his own.

- All Abraham had to do was take a journey through foreign territory to this place he had never before seen.
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I think I've told the story before, but it so wonderfully illustrates the point.

A man was hiking in the mountains, not paying attention to his surroundings, and fell off a thousand-foot cliff.

- Half-way down, he caught on to a small tree growing from the side of the cliff.
 - He looked down at the sharp rocks far below him and at the sheer ledge far above him and cried out, "Is anybody up there?"
 - "YES!" came a booming voice. "I AM HERE. I AM THE LORD."
 - "Will you help me?" pleaded the man.
 - "YES," came the reply, "BUT YOU MUST DO EXACTLY AS I TELL YOU. LET GO OF THE BRANCH."
 - "What?!" cried the man.
 - "LET GO OF THE BRANCH."
 - The man paused for a moment, looked down again at those rocks far below him, and then looked back up.
 - "Is anybody else up there?" he called out.
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Weak faith wants all kinds of help, all kinds of signs, all kinds of guarantees that what I'm about to do will turn out all right.

- We all face situations where we do not know what outcome GOD has in store for us.
 - And in these situations, we find ourselves looking around,
 - wondering if it's going to work out.
 - worried about what others might think,
 - fearful of what might happen to me,
 - and looking for assurances that this is really what GOD wants me to do.

Yet, when faith obeys GOD'S word in the face of the unknown, we find a freedom that allows us to step confidently into the unknown,

- trusting in the ever-present help and support of GOD.
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If you've seen the movie, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, you may remember the scene where Indie is faced with a great chasm across which is the entrance to the place where the Holy Grail rests.

- The only way across is called the leap of faith, stepping into the abyss with nothing but your trust in GOD.
- Indiana, in order to save his father, must step into that great emptiness, but has momentary doubts.

- Finally, though, he steps and discovers that there is a hidden bridge that will bring him to the other side.
- Yet that supporting bridge is only there for those who are willing to depend on GOD and take the leap of faith.

GOD called Abraham to take the leap of faith by going to an unknown promised land, and Abraham put his trust in the LORD.

- GOD called Jacob to return and reconcile with the brother he had cheated, and Jacob trusted GOD.
- GOD called Moses to go back to Egypt and an uncertain meeting with Pharaoh to ask for the release of GOD'S people, and Moses faithfully stepped into the unknown.
- GOD called David to face a powerful giant with only a sling and a handful of stones, and David trusted GOD to see him through.
- GOD called Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to step into a hot and fiery furnace instead of worshiping an earthly king, and protected by GOD in that furnace, their faith grew stronger.

GOD calls to us at various times in our life to take that leap of faith.

- GOD calls us to speak, or to pray, or to go without knowing how we will be received nor what lies at the end of test.
- GOD calls us to act in ways, the outcome of which we are unsure, but the promise of which is a tremendous blessing to us and to others.
- GOD calls us to carry whatever amount of faith we have now to a new place with the assurance that, in doing so, our faith will be stronger.

Faith is a personal union between the believer and the risen CHRIST, which is brought into our hearts by the HOLY SPIRIT.

- To grow stronger in faith means to grow stronger in our relationship with CHRIST.
- To grow stronger in faith means to let HIS leading take priority over our personal agendas or desires.
- To grow stronger in faith means that CHRIST becomes stronger in me, for faith is nothing other than that: CHRIST in me.

Strong faith is not something reserved for a handful of super saints.

- Strong faith is available to all of us.
 - You can have a stronger faith.
 - You can grow in the depth of your commitment.
 - You can increase your trust and hope in CHRIST,
 - by listening for HIS invitation to go,
 - by releasing yourself from your dependent support systems,
 - by facing the unknown that GOD has set before you,
 - and by trusting that GOD will provide for you the words and the actions that you need so that you can do that to which GOD has called you.

Because we have a GOD who is strong, a GOD who loves us, a GOD who wants more for us,

- we can leap into the air like Jeff Braaten, or step into the abyss like Indiana Jones, or go to an unknown but promised land like Abraham,
 - and in doing so, we will find ourselves with yet a stronger faith.