

August 10th, 2025

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 “What Faith Looks Like”

Language is a complicated thing isn't it? It is the principal method of human communication. Most of the time, we associate language with words, but gestures play an important part too, as I all-too-often demonstrate. But let's just stick with words today. What do you think of when you see or hear the word, “faith?” It's an important word when we're talking about religion because faith is an element of how we Christians express our beliefs. It's also a *loaded* word! In English, it can mean the belief in something unseen or unproven. The writer of Hebrews backs this up in today's scripture by saying -- “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith can also mean trust in someone or something based on past experiences like, “I have faith that I can count on my friend.” But what happens when something that we've been hoping for *doesn't* happen? Or when someone or something that you've always counted on isn't there? Some people might say, “I've lost my faith.” Anyone here ever been in this situation? If you haven't, I'm impressed. And I also suspect that you're living in some kind of Matrix-style simulated reality, because I don't know too many folks who have friends who haven't let them down or who have received everything they've ever hoped for.

Okay, let's move on to something else that might challenge our understanding of faith. Let's talk about the actual word faith because as we've already said, language is complicated. Trying to communicate what something means in *one* language to someone who communicates in *another* is difficult. Anyone who has ever used a language application like Google Translate knows how awkward translation can be. Back in 2012, our church hosted George Ngoka, a global mission partner from the Democratic Republic of Congo. George didn't speak English, he spoke French. He was visiting several churches in our region, so our Regional Minister suggested we find a French-language interpreter to help congregations understand George's presentations. Fortunately, Edy Roberts knew someone who is fluid in French and she agreed to help

out. However, I needed to go pick up George and his wife Gertrude from First Christian Church in Woodland and bring them back here. No problem! What -- that's less than an hour. I've got Google Translate. We'll be able to communicate just fine.

It's one thing to look at a word and know what it means. Nouns are usually straightforward — bird, mountain, car. Verbs take a bit more thought, but they're manageable too — drive, eat, walk. But some verbs — like pursue, endure, or manifest — are harder to translate directly from one language to another. That's where things get more complicated. Languages vary in how specific or general they are with certain concepts. Take the word love, for example. In English, we use the same word whether we're talking about loving our spouse, our friends, or pizza. But in Greek, there are three distinct words for love: one for universal or unconditional love (agape), one for deep friendship or emotional connection (philia), and another for passionate or romantic love (eros). This lack of nuance in English can make translating between languages difficult — and sometimes awkward. That's one reason tools like Google Translate often fall short. Translation isn't just about matching words — it requires interpretation, context, and an understanding of the culture behind the language. So, believe me, I was happy to get back to Chico where Edy's friend could interpret.

In Greek, the word for “faith” is πίστις (pistis). This could mean faith, trust, belief, confidence or loyalty. So our problem as English speakers is that we often have a very narrow definition of faith, which can lead to a serious problem we've developed lately. Sometimes the best way to understand the meaning of a word is by comparing it to its opposite. To understand up, it helps to know down. To grasp bright, you need to understand dim. You get the idea. So what happens when we try to define faith in contrast to reason? Often, this leads to a distorted view — as if faith is something that kicks in when reason fails. You'll hear people say, “I don't need evidence or reason — I have faith.” But that's flawed thinking.

In many religious traditions, faith and reason have worked together for centuries. Faith is not the absence of reason. In fact, some of the most important breakthroughs in science and mathematics have come from people whose faith fueled their curiosity about the world. Take Al-Khwarizmi, a devout Muslim whose belief in a rational Creator led him to develop algebra and lay the foundations for algorithms which help us predict weather or measure climate change. Or Jonas Salk, the Jewish scientist who created the polio vaccine, inspired by the concept of tikkun olam — “repairing the world.” Even Charles Darwin, who studied theology and was raised in the Church of England, found his early sense of wonder in creation to be a driving force behind his work on evolution.

Wait a minute, Pastor — are you trying to be sneaky here? You’re telling me that the father of algebra — whose work helped scientists track planetary motion, which eventually allowed astrophysicists to prove the Earth revolves around the sun (something that seems to contradict the Biblical account in Genesis) — was a person of faith? Yes. And you’re saying that the person behind one of the greatest medical breakthroughs in history — the development of the polio vaccine — was motivated by his religious convictions? Yes. And here’s the big one: you’re telling me that Charles Darwin, the archenemy of biblical literalists, proposed the theory of evolution not because he wanted to destroy faith, but because he was so captivated by the wonder of creation that he wanted to understand how it all worked? Yes. And get this — their discoveries didn’t destroy their faith one bit. If anything, they deepened it.

So, Pastor — are you seriously telling us that science and faith can actually co-exist? That maybe science and religion aren’t enemies or even competing worldviews? Yes. That’s exactly what I’m saying. In fact, I’d go even further: faith was never meant to be anti-reason. At its best, faith involves reasoned trust — grounded in evidence, experience, and sometimes even revelation. Geez, Pastor, no need to go all heretical on us. But here’s the truth: I know many of you are here because we don’t ask you to check your brain at the door. You’re here because we value faith that seeks understanding — not blind allegiance, not fear-

based certainty. What's sad is that sometimes it feels like churches like ours are the exception, not the rule.

As I said a few weeks ago, the opposite of faith is not doubt – it's certitude. When a person says, "I believe that the world was made in seven literal days because that's what it says in Genesis one," that is *not* a statement of faith. It's a statement of certitude. The person is *really* saying, "I am certain that the Bible is correct when it says the earth was created in seven days. You can't convince me otherwise with your so-called 'evidence.'" A statement of faith would be, "The vast expanse of knowledge that we have gained since recorded history points to overwhelming evidence that the earth started its formation around 4.5 billion years ago and humans have only existed for somewhere around 100-150 thousand years." This presents a different cosmology than the Bible, but I'm okay with it because it doesn't change the way I connect with God. I have faith that even if the earth *wasn't* created in seven literal days, I will still love God with all my heart, soul and might. And in addition to this, I will love my neighbor as myself because that's what Jesus teaches us to do, and I will endeavor to live my life in a way that reflects Jesus' life because I'm a Christian. Seven days or 4.5 billion years. It doesn't matter. *That's* a statement of faith.

We in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are what some have called, "Faith seeking understanding." In other words, faith comes first, but as we gain knowledge through our interaction with our world and beyond, our faith remains. Could you imagine what the church could have accomplished over the centuries if we just embraced that model of thinking rather than digging in our heels and treating faith and reason like mortal enemies? A lot of time, resources, and energy have been wasted trying to argue over something that's not even worth arguing about. But that's me.

Let's talk about some of the folks that the writer of Hebrews lists. For the sake of brevity, Jean just read verses 1-3, then 8-16. In this whole chapter, though, the writer presents a list of people who had heroic

measures of faith. Abel. Enoch. Noah. Abraham. Sarah. Isaac. Jacob. Moses. Barak. Samson. David. Samuel. All of the prophets. These were people who, by faith accomplished amazing things that made it possible for people to stay connected with God. And not once did this list mention anything about these people digging in their heels and refusing to let go of old paradigms and obsessively arguing about how right they are. It's the opposite of that. These were people who faced incredibly trying times where they weren't sure what they should do or where they should go, or how they should respond to situations beyond their control. They didn't have to bear down and dig in, they let go and trust that God had their best interests in mind. I'm not always a big fan of pithy little sayings relating to faith, but the one I like the most is, "Let go and let God." It takes faith to let go.

So here's the question for us today: If faith is not blind allegiance or stubborn certainty, but reasoned trust in the God who loves us — what might that look like in your life this week? Maybe it means loosening your grip on the old arguments and reaching instead for the hands of your neighbor. Maybe it means holding the tension between what we know and what we don't know — and trusting that God is present in both. Maybe it means remembering that faith is not about winning debates, but about living in such a way that people see the life of Jesus in you.

Friends, Hebrews tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen — and we are part of a long line of people who have walked that road before us. They didn't get there by clinging to fear or fighting for certitude. They got there by trusting God enough to take the next step. So may we be people who let go of our need to be right and take hold of the grace that sets us free. May we walk forward in faith — thinking deeply, loving fully, and trusting boldly.