

Title: Kinds of Faith
Text: John 4:46-54
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Immanuel Baptist Church
Chuck Queen, Pastor

Ann Lamott is both a novelist and a spiritual writer who shatters people's stereotypes of spiritual writers. One reviewer describes her as a "dreadlock-wearing, left-wing, born-again Christian who uses edgy humor and salty language when speaking of her deeply held personal faith." She is offensive to some Christians, but her books about the spiritual life have become national best-sellers. Here's an interesting statement she makes about faith: "Sometimes I can imagine God shaking his or her head going, "Oh, Annie, whatever." Other times, when I have been at my most awful, like I was this morning, most feeling cast out and lost and hopeless, I feel the love of a mother-father God. I feel loved like a baby would be. So evangelicals—we can talk one-on-one, but then, it's like that Dylan song "With God on Our Side." If you are not careful, you think you are right, and you are sure that your beliefs are the true beliefs. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. I'm not certain about a lot, and I hope that gets me partial credit in heaven."

What is faith? I have heard at least one interpreter of John's Gospel call this the Gospel of belief because some form of the Greek word for faith, usually translated in the English versions by some form of the word for belief, occurs over a hundred times. But the word or concept is never clearly defined. There are no simple definitions in John's Gospel of faith. What we have are stories where different aspects of faith are expressed by the characters in the stories.

Notice how faith is reflected in this story. The son of a "certain royal official" is sick unto death. This royal official, some administrator in Herod's kingdom, obviously is a man of some means who has access to the resources that money provides, but money or position or power cannot do anything for his son. He is quite desperate in seeking help. In spite of his title and position, he comes to Jesus, a Jew, whom he believes has the capacity to heal his son.

Jesus' initial response is not a direct response to the official: "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will not believe." This is more of a reflection on how the Galileans responded to Jesus. John has prepared us for this in the narrative by inserting the proverb in v. 44 about a prophet being rejected in his own country. Their faith was a faith based primarily on signs and wonders—what they could see with their eyes or experience with their senses.

What do you think about a faith that looks for some kind of proof? Some of you are familiar with the story at the end of this Gospel of Jesus' encounter with the disciple

Thomas, who has traditionally been called “doubting Thomas.” It is a resurrection story. Thomas was absent when Jesus appeared to the other disciples who by the way were also doubters (they all had doubted the report of the women who brought the news of Jesus’ resurrection). They said to Thomas, “we have seen the Lord.” And he said, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” In other words, unless I see for myself, I will not believe.

This is common Christian experience. Most all of us have sought some kind of personal experience with the living Christ have we not? Thomas wanted to experience the living Christ for himself; we shouldn’t fault him for that. Jesus appeared to Thomas and told him, “Stop doubting and believe.” And then Jesus said, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

There are some people who want proof; others are able to believe without proof. If you are one who needs proof then faith may be very difficult for you because we don’t have a lot of proof. Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest, author, and popular guest speaker. She left the pastorate a few years ago and now teaches religion at a small college in North Carolina when she is not speaking somewhere. She says, “I’m on the edge of Christianity and I expect to get a letter telling me I’ve been kicked out any day now. But my choice at this point in my life is to practice the religion of Jesus instead of the religion about Jesus . . . I’ve spent thirty years in the church. That’s not a long time, but enough time to have questions about what we do as Christians. I look at ways in which our institutionalization of the religion about Jesus has caused bloodshed, caused terrific division, caused incredible cruelty to other people in the name of evangelism or preaching the gospel, so that I’m in a very humble space around the faith that I practice now. I’m in a very small, humble space and doing my best to see the things in it that would displease Jesus, that would shame him, that would break his heart, and seeing how, theologically, I can deal with those things without giving up Christianity.” Though Barbara Brown Taylor served the church for many years she hasn’t seen a lot of proof for faith in the church and now she says she is more interested in the religion of Jesus rather than the religion about Jesus found in institutional Christianity. I am not as skeptical as Taylor, but it’s interesting to hear her perspective.

We look at our world, and we see both randomness and purpose, and all of us have experienced something of both in our lives. Life is not a blueprint, it is not determined; much is happenchance. If God somehow purposed or determined the horrible calamities of our world then God would not be worthy of being worshiped as God; God would be no God at all. But there is beauty and much that reflects purpose and order. The whole evolutionary process is a mixture of randomness and order.

I don’t see God as an interventionist, but I see God at work in the world. I don’t know if I can explain that. There is a lot of paradox and uncertainty to faith to this kind of faith.

There is a wonderful and yet terrifying freedom built into the whole human condition, including the natural processes of creation. This freedom can produce great beauty as in the beaches of South Africa or great terror as in a tsunami or earthquake. We as human beings can use our freedom to alleviate suffering or cause suffering. I don't see God intervening to stop this process. It's the way it is. One can look at the whole of creation and see God; another can look at the same creation and not see God. There's no proof. We don't have proof. So when we base our faith on signs and wonders we are building on a shaky foundation.

What happens next in the Gospel story is a development of a different kind of faith. The royal official says to Jesus, "Sir, come down before my child dies." And Jesus says, "Go, your son will live." This is a test of faith. He has most likely seen Jesus speak words of healing and touch people who are sick and heal them, or at the very least he has heard reports of such. But here Jesus says, "Go, your son is healed." Can Jesus do this? Jesus has never met his son, doesn't know his son, is not close to his son. Can Jesus heal from a distance? The Gospel text says that the royal official took Jesus at his word and departed.

Can we trust the word of Jesus? It is true that we don't have the exact word of Jesus. What we have in the Gospels in our New Testaments is a combination of what Jesus said and what the early followers said about Jesus, a combination of history and early Christian preaching, a combination of memory and theology—and in the Gospel of John we have more theology than memory, more of what was being said about Jesus than what Jesus actually said. But we do have in the Gospels the basic message and life of Jesus and the question is: Can we trust that? I can. I can trust that the message of Jesus and the life of Jesus leads to all that is good and hopeful and compassionate and just. I can trust that. I can believe that.

Faith is more of a dance than a structured system where God makes a move and then we make a move, or maybe we make the move and then God moves, and because it is more of a dance than a blueprint it requires an openness—an openness to change, to course correction, to new insights and beliefs. There is sense then where doubt is necessary for a growing faith. A closed faith is a certain faith and certain faith can be destructive. People who are certain in their faith are people who shoot workers in abortion clinics; they volunteer for suicide missions that set off bombs in public places thinking it will earn them a place in paradise. They will do great harm to others simply to defend their belief. A certain faith can lead to blind obedience that leaves a wake of destruction in its path.

We do not have absolute truth; we all see through a glass dimly—it's the human condition and so we do not have absolute truth. But we can have foundational truth. My foundational truth is grounded in the message and life of Jesus of Nazareth. Foundational truths that are healthy promote life and goodness in ourselves and in others. Such truths are based on a faith that believes the best about God.

In our Gospel story the royal official was met by his servant on his journey home. His servants met him with the news that his son had revived and was healed. In the Gospel of John those who believe in Jesus find life because Jesus is the mediator and bearer of life. If our faith does not lead to a renewal of life, if it is not life enhancing and sustaining then it is not faith in Jesus nor is it the faith of Jesus. Faith in Jesus or the faith of Jesus leads us to pray for, work for, give ourselves for the betterment of life, not just for ourselves, but for others. Jesus, who lived this faith, gave his life for the good of others, for the good of the world. To trust in Jesus or to have the faith of Jesus empowers us to give ourselves for the good of others.

I know some of you are in the process of reading “The Shack.” One of the real positive messages of that book is that it portrays faith as trust in the goodness of God. That is the basis of an ongoing, developing relationship with God—trust in God’s goodness. Healthy religion is grounded in the goodness of God. Jesus believed in the goodness of God.

I think that the faith of Jesus is even more important than faith in Jesus. There are people in other religious systems who do not have the kind of faith in Jesus that we have, but that have the faith of Jesus. Their faith is grounded in the goodness of God. This may be most important starting point for all authentic religious experience.

Sometimes things happen that confirms our faith and helps our faith to grow. When this royal official was met by his servants and informed that his son had recovered, he realized that this happened the moment when Jesus said, “Your son will live.” The text says, “So he and his whole household believed.” Didn’t he believe already? Yes, but you see this is a different kind of faith. His faith was confirmed by his experience. Sometimes we have experiences that confirm our faith. To others they may be just coincidences, but to us they are little miracles. Not intervention, but God at work—I can’t explain that, but I do trust it.

The writer Frederick Buechner recalls sitting by the roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid about what was going on in his family and afraid that his daughter who had a terrible eating disorder might die. And out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that he needed to see exactly then. The word was TRUST. Buechner says, “What do you call a moment like that? Something to laugh off as a kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while? Or do you call it the word of God?” He says, “I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both, but for me it was an epiphany.” The owner of the car turned out to be a trust officer in a bank and somehow he came across the account that Buechner wrote of that incident. He brought to Buechner the license plate itself which now sits propped up on his bookshelf in his house. Buechner says, “It is rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen.” There are things that happen that we can’t explain that confirm our faith.

Faith is more difficult for some than others. I don't know why that is. It may have to do with our upbringing, our experiences in life, the influence of others, our education—I don't know. But I hope and pray for all of us here today that we will know the kind of faith that can lay hold of the goodness of God—to trust that God is good and to live that goodness and work for that goodness, so that families and communities and whole societies might be shaped by that goodness and committed to do good and promote the good and live out of that goodness which is at the heart of God.