

Text: Mark 9v14-29

Title: Levels of faith

Time and place: 06/19/2022 at Bridgetown Church

Reading:

Set up:

- Good morning...
- Okay, this is my first teaching in nine months, so forgive me if I'm a bit rusty... But Tyler and I both thought it would be fitting for me to teach one last time before we move. And I just want to pass on a little bit of what God has been/still is teaching me over sabbatical...

Intro:

- 21 days.
- In an isolated cabin, up in the Puget Sound area. Alone.
- No phone, no computer, you literally hand over any devices when you check in.
- No books.
- The Bible is "allowed," but with a gentle warning not to use it as a "distraction."
- No alcohol.
- No exercise, nothing to "discharge the anxiety from your body."
- And no contact with the outside world. You pack in all your own food and do all your own cooking.
- Your one human interaction is, five mornings a week, at 5:50am, you have depth therapy with a clinical psychologist, which is kind of like therapy, but without the feeling better after your session part.
- This program is over fifty years old, but it has no name, no website, it's all word of mouth.
- I've known about this program for years, and on my sabbatical, I finally had the time and space to do it.
- As an introvert with a lot of silence and solitude in my Rule of Life, I thought I would kind of crush it... I mean, I've done a teaching series on silence and solitude; I've literally starting writing a book on it; I thought I would kind of enjoy it – a 21 day digital detox!
- It was one of *the* most haunting, painful, difficult things I have ever done.
- This program was designed to recreate the experience of Jesus in the desert.
- I'm used to learning by addition – reading books, hearing teachings, listening to a podcast, etc. But they say the desert teaches by subtraction, by taking away.

- In the desert, all your coping mechanisms, all your escapist behaviors, all the mechanism we use to run from pain... are all stripped away, and your soul is laid bare.
- Until you go into the desert, you don't really know what's *in* you.
- *So much* came up from the substrata to the surface in my heart, and I just want to share *one* thing with you that I was forced to confront on my solitude retreat – that is, just how much the first half of my life has been run by fear... how much fear is in my body, and animating my behavior... and, on the flip side, just how little faith I have...
- As most of you know, I'm essentially living through a freely-chosen mid-life crisis. I just turned 42; I stepped down from the lead pastor role to start Practicing the Way; we're moving.
- And, as you would imagine, pretty much *any* fear that *could* come up, *has* come up.

Seam: Now, we all have fear that we carry in our body...

Fear:

- Fear is the anticipation of evil.
- And God designed a fear impulse in the body itself as a survival instinct, to keep you alive.
- Studies have been done on people with brain damage who no longer have the capacity for fear, and the stories are not of bliss, but of horror.
- But psychologists distinguish between **primary emotions and secondary emotions.**
- Primary emotions are how we react in the moment to stimuli – when you're walking along the sidewalk and you almost get hit by a car, what do you feel? Fear. That's not a conscious decision; that's just an automatic response in your nervous system. Fear, anger, happiness, embarrassment, laughter, these are primary emotions.
- And the Bible never shames these emotions. Think of the line in Ephesians 4: "Be angry but in your anger do not sin."
- Read the Psalms; they teach us to *pray* our primary emotions to God: all of them – anger, rage, jealousy, envy, doubt, shame, loneliness.
- But if we don't pray our primary emotions, if instead, we let them take root in our mind and body, they become *secondary* emotions.
- They move from a passing feeling based on external stimuli, to a personality trait based on internal makeup, the result of a strange alchemy of attitude and habit and neuroplasticity and family of origin and life experience and all the rest.
- For example, a feeling of hurt is turned into a state of bitterness. Anger into hate. Sadness into self-pity. Confusion into despair.
- The sign that a secondary emotion has taken root in you is, *you can't pray it anymore.* It's a part of you. You need it to stay alive.
- But secondary emotions *kill* the life of the soul.

- The seven deadly sins of church history, which date back to Evagrius and the Desert Fathers, are all secondary emotions: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.
- All that to say, for me, the fear that came up in me on my solitude retreat and in this season of our “confusing in between,” wasn’t the healthy kind of fear that’s a signal from my body; it was the secondary emotion kind. A “deadly sin.”

Seam: And I know from pastoral experience, that I am not alone.

Fear to faith:

- Fear is, arguably, at the root of all our problems in the spiritual life.
- Why? Because the telos of the spiritual journey is to become a person of love, as defined by Jesus. And it is written, “there is no fear in love.” As long as we need our life to go a certain way, we will, despite our best intentions, act in ways that are unloving to anyone who gets in our way. Fear is at the root of all sin.
- And faith is, at some level, the ultimate solution.
- Early on in the pandemic, someone in the American south coined the phrase “faith over fear,” which became a rally cry for an anti-lockdown, anti-vax, anti-government overreach movement, and hence, more polarizing language in the culture wars. You may hate it, or you may love it.
- That’s beside the point: I’m not referring to where you fall on the Left/Right spectrum, but how far along you are on the spiritual journey.
- The Catholic theologian and psychologist Benedict Groeschel summarizes the entirety of the spiritual journey as a decrease in fear and an increase in faith.
- As a gradual shift from what Jesus called “anxious care,” to a deep, peaceful trust in God.

Seam: To that end, what exactly *is* faith? And how do we mature in it as disciples of Jesus?

Faith:

- The word faith is *pistus* in Greek.
- *Pistus* is one of a constellation of Greek words inside a semantic domain:
 - o Faith
 - o Belief
 - o Trust
 - o Confidence
 - o Reliance
 - o Allegiance
 - o Faithfulness

- All these words orbit around a center of gravity that is **faith**, which is best defined as **confidence grounded in reality**.
 - o Faith is *not* a blind leap into the dark, contrary to popular opinion: it's not believing something for which there is no evidence, but believing something based on evidence. As the Quaker Elton Trueblood, who was the chaplain at Stanford, said, "Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservations."
 - o Faith is not a feeling, though it has an emotional component.
 - o And it's certainly not just mental ascent (which is the fatal flaw of the Reformation), though it has to do what you believe; but it's an action.
- It's something you *do*. You *put your faith in God*.
- And faith is at the center of our discipleship to Jesus.
- To the point, you can summarize all of Christian spirituality as "the faith," a practicing dating back to the NT itself, where Paul writes about how there is "one faith."

We all live by faith:

- But the first thing you need to understand about **faith** is that it **isn't a religious thing, it's a human thing**.
- We *all* live by faith. It's impossible not to.
- Again, faith is a sense of trust or reliance on someone or something.
- Example: I have faith that this stage will bear my weight, so a few minutes ago, I walked up onto it. I don't know that for sure... but I have faith, I trust it to support me. If I had no faith, I would not have come up here; if I had weak faith, I would have come up, but I'd be full of fear right now, and I'd likely stand on the edge, ready to jump off should it fail me; but since I have a relatively strong faith in the stage, I'm up here, doing what I need to do, and I'm not afraid.
- I have faith that my car will start after church and get me home. I have faith that my debit card will work when I go to buy lunch. I have faith that my wife will be waiting for me at home.
- I live by faith; so do you. Whether you are a disciple of Jesus or a Buddhist or an atheist.
- Even at the meta level of the meaning and purpose of life...
- **The question isn't, Do you have faith? It's *who* or *what* do you put your faith *in*?**
- Here's the philosopher James K.A. Smith:
 - o **"The question isn't whether you're going to believe, but *who*; it's not merely about what to believe, but *who* to entrust yourself to. Do you really want to trust yourself? Do we really think humanity is our best bet? Do we really think we are the answer to our problems, we who've generated all of them?"**

Seam: Hence, the invitation of Jesus is to put our faith in *him*. In his life, teachings, death, resurrection, and his coming again.

Development of faith as a virtue:

- Faith in NT theology is one of the three “theological virtues,” along with hope and love.
- “Theological,” meaning, faith in the Christian sense doesn’t make sense apart from God. And “virtue,” meaning, again, faith is not a feeling. It’s the shape of your inner woman or man. Through apprenticing under Jesus, you become a person of faith, a person with trust and confidence in Jesus.
- And like any virtue, faith must be developed.
- Faith is like a muscle; we grow it through a kind of resistance training.
- Like a baby, we *start* weak in faith, and every obstacle we face is a chance to “work out” our faith muscle and strengthen our sense of inner peace.
- You see this on display in mature disciples of Jesus. They are incredibly at ease. The word “imperturbable” comes to mind. They are some of the most relaxed, confident, joyful people you will ever meet; because they live with this unshakable trust that everything will be just fine, even if things *aren’t* just fine.
- They have traveled the spiritual journey from fear to faith...

Seam: Now, what is the landscape of such a journey?

Spiritual cartography:

- I’m a firm believer in what I call “spiritual cartography,” which is a kind of mapping of the spiritual journey. The Christian analogue to what secular academics call “stage theory.”
- It’s an attempt to map the arc of discipleship over a lifetime, in order to plot yourself on such a map, and better name Jesus’ warnings and invitations along the way.
- To that end, let me offer you a map for the development of faith. You could title this three levels of faith, since we millennials love to “level up.”
- This paradigm is *not* chapter and verse, but I would argue, you could overlay it over pretty much any biopic in Scripture: Job, Moses, David, Paul, take your pick.
- Level one is...

1. The faith of religion

- This is Job at the beginning of the story; or Paul on the road to Damascus; it’s where all of us start – the faith of religion.
- The word “religion” gets a bad rap. It’s used by a lot of Christians as a polemic against a particular *kind* of religion that is heavy on rules and light on relationship. Hence the maxim: “It’s not a religion, it’s a relationship.”
- But religion is best defined as a set of beliefs that explain what life is all about, who we are, and how we should live.

- By this definition, *all* people are religious. You can't *not* be. Your religion may be "Christianity" or it may be Islam or Christian Science or politics or social justice or all things Pride or careerism or you name it.
- But in discipleship to Jesus, the faith of religion is essentially a way of relating to God that is based on quid pro quo.
- If I _____, then God will _____.

 - o If I put my faith in Jesus, then I will go to the Good Place.
 - o If I tithe, then God will bless me financially.
 - o If I don't have sex before marriage, then God will bless me with a great spouse and an even better sex life.

- In evangelicalism, the catch phrase for this first level of faith is "biblical principles for living." Which are great (for the record: I'm *all for* biblical principles for living), but, left unchecked, they can become an attempt to use God and insider knowledge of his ways to engineer the circumstances of your life to *your* desired end. Just another human attempt to minimize pain and maximize pleasure, but under the guise of "Christianity."
- This is Book of Proverbs level faith.
 - o Most people don't realize that, contrary to the novelist Dan Brown's *Divinche Code*, there was very little controversy around the canonization of Scripture. Early on, there was a wide consensus around which writings had that special quality, and which did not, as well as stringent criteria. But few Christians know that one of the most hotly contested books that almost didn't make it in, was Proverbs. Shocker, I know... Here's why: If you read Proverbs as a book of general wisdom principles, than it's incredibly insightful. But if you read it as a book of promises, they simply aren't true. I mean, they *are*, about 80% of the time.
- At some point, this formulaic approach to God will fail you.
- A crisis *will* come. And God will not save you from it. Or you will do the right thing, and instead of being rewarded, you will be punished. Or you will go through a period of pain and suffering, with no idea where God is and what he is doing.
- When that crisis comes – not if, but *when* – you have three options:
 - o Option 1: You step back from faith. In more biblical language, you "fall away." This is one cause behind the phenomenon of deconstruction. Many people never mature beyond the faith of religion, and, as Jesus said, "When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away."
 - o Option 2: you step aside, and you compartmentalize your faith. You put God over here, away from the whole of your life. You just live with that incoherence... Religion becomes what Tozer called a "dull habit," not a burning flame.
 - o Option 3: you step *up*, to the next level of faith...

2. The faith of desperation

- This is the faith that's called for in a crisis. When the direct intervention of God is your only hope. When...
 - o The diagnosis comes, and it's a death sentence.
 - o You get the phone call and it's worst case scenario.
 - o Your prayer is unanswered.
 - o The plan falls through.
 - o The dream dies.
 - o The relationship is over.
 - o You are forced to admit, it's a failure.
 - o In the Dark Night of the Soul.
- It's the faith of the man in the story – he's at a breaking point. His son is demonized. He's exhausted every possible solution. He has no control. The Biblical principle of "Train up a child in the way they should go" isn't cutting it.
- His only hope is a miracle.
- So what does he do? He goes to Jesus. In weak, but real faith.
- Verse 22: "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."
- What does Jesus say, "If you can't? ...Everything is possible for one who believes."
- Jesus is coaxing the man up to a new level of faith. Calling on the man to believe in the power of God and possibility of life in the kingdom of God.
- You see, as uncomfortable as I am with it, there is a reciprocal relationship between our level of faith and our experience of the release of God's power.
- John Wimber used to say "Faith is spelled R-I-S-K." Meaning, we have to risk, to "step out in faith," if we want to see God's power manifest.
- This man is risking heartache, yet *another* wave of disappointment, social stigma, things getting *worse*, he's risking all of it in the faith of desperation.
- And in this story, there's a happy ending. The boy is set free.

Seam: But what if he wasn't? Hypothetical scenario. What if the story ended like *Jesus'* story, where, in his crisis, he prayed, Father, take this cup from me? And heaven was quiet. And on the cross, he prayed, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And the sky was black.

- You see, there is an even higher level of faith, that is...

3. The faith of surrender

- This is where you aren't believing in God for any particular outcome; you're just believing in God himself.
- It's Jesus: "Not my will, but yours be done." It's Job at the *end* of his story: "My eyes have seen the Lord, now I repent in dust and ashes." No more questions, no more demands. It's Paul: "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain."

- It doesn't mean you don't *have* desires for a particular outcome (all of us do, all of us desire to minimize pain and maximize pleasure.); it means you're not emotionally attached to your desires.
- You see, the struggle with attachment is at the *root* of all our fear – it's the ball and chain that is holding us in the prison of fear, and back from the freedom of faith.
- As the saying goes, Our anxieties reveal our attachments. What we worry about, ruminate on, get stressed about, reveals what it is we think we need to be happy.
- The spiritual writer Anthony Demillo said it this way:
 - o "If you look carefully you will see that there is one thing that causes unhappiness. The name of that thing is attachment. What is an attachment? An emotional state of clinging caused by the belief that without some particular thing or some person you cannot be happy."
- An attachment is not a desire, it's an "emotional state of clinging" to a desire. It's not wanting something, it's *needing* something to be okay.
- Our attachments, or in more Reformed language, our "idols," promise us peace and happiness, but they give us anxiety and misery. Because *all* of our attachments can, and, at some point, will be stripped away. If not by a crisis or a betrayal or a failure or a global pandemic or a recession... by old age and death.
- The paradox of Jesus' teaching is, *as long as you need your life to go a certain way to be happy and at peace, you will never be happy and at peace.*
- Therefore, one way to think of the spiritual journey is as a slow burning off of our attachments to all that is not God.
- The final state of spiritual formation is what the ancients called *apatheia*.
- It's often translated "peace" or "serenity," that calm you see in the face of only the most mature disciples of Jesus.
- If you're familiar with ancient Christian iconography, it's what the artists are trying to communicate with the facial expression of Jesus and the Saints. **image**
- For example, here's Christ Pantocrator, from the sixth century, currently in the Monastery of Saint Catherine in Egypt, one of the oldest monasteries in the world.
- So much Jesus art is all based on this original. And for years, I didn't like it, because I thought Jesus looked sad, even a bit dour. And I imagine him as joyful.
- But to view ancient Christian art is a cross cultural experience. In America, we smile for the camera. America is about in the middle on the global happiness index, but we score at or near the top in emotional expression. Meaning, we present as much happier than we actually are. But even here, less than a century ago, it was not our culture to smile for a camera or portrait.
- The artist behind Christ Pantocrator wasn't trying to communicate that Jesus was grumpy, but that he had reached the state of *apatheia*. The peace that comes on the other side of pain and suffering.
- Another translation of *apatheia* is "detachment," which is the opposite of "attachment." Not an emotional clinging, but an emotional letting go.

- Detachment in the Christian tradition is a bit different than in Buddhism, where the aim is the negation of all desire; in Christian spirituality, it's the reordering of our desire, to "seek first the kingdom of God."
- Desire isn't all bad, in Christian thought; it's like the engine of our life, driving us forward; the problem is our desires are all out of whack. We either want the wrong things, or we want the right things but in the wrong order.
- Dr. Robert Mulholland defined detachment as "A deep inner posture of joyful release of our life and being to God in absolute trust, without demands, without conditions, without reservation... [It is] neither a passive resignation nor a fatalistic acquiescence to whatever comes. It is, rather, a consistent posture of actively turning our whole being to God so that God's presence, purpose, and power can be released through our lives into all situations."
- Saint Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit Order called this posture "indifference." Or another translation of his original Spanish word is "freedom." Where you are *free* of the emotional need for your life to go a certain way to be happy and at peace.
- The "first principle" in his famous *Spiritual Exercises* is:
 - o "We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God. Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening his life in me."
- This is what St. John of the Cross was getting at when he said:
 - o *To reach satisfaction in all*
 - o *Desire satisfaction in nothing*
 - o *To come to possess all*
 - o *Desire the possession of nothing.*
 - o *To arrive at being all*
 - o *Desire to be nothing.*
- Or what St. Teresa of Avila was saying with:
 - o *Let nothing disturb you;*
 - o *Let nothing make you afraid;*
 - o *All things pass;*
 - o *But God is unchanging,*
 - o *Patience*
 - o *is enough for everything.*
 - o *You who have God*
 - o *lack nothing.*
 - o *God alone is sufficient.*
- It's the ability to calmly hold in your mind the *reality* of your life, and be grateful, content, and at peace.
- *This* is the highest level of faith. Not faith that everything will work out perfectly. But that, *no matter what happens* – even if all my worst fears come true – we have God, and he's enough. We do not need to be afraid.

Hinge: You could frame it this way:

- Level one – the faith of religion – is taking hold of life from God.
- Level two – the faith of desperation – is holding onto to God himself, as your life from God is under threat.
- Level three – the faith of surrender – is letting go of your life entirely, and just holding onto God as your all, and receiving whatever comes as a gift.

Seam: How do we mature to this level of faith? And reach the state of *apatheia*?

Active/passive:

- Well, we mature in two basic ways, through what our spiritual ancestors called “active spirituality” and “passive spirituality.”
- Active spirituality is where it *feels* like you take the initiative, like, if you don’t do it, it won’t happen. It’s our part in our formation.
- Passive spirituality is where it *feels* more like *God* takes the initiative; It’s God’s part in our formation.
- At an active level, there’s a few things we can do to grow in faith:
- 1. Step out in faith. Risk. Trust God for something, however small.
 - o Willard was once asked how to become a saint, and he said, “Do the next right thing.”
 - o Just do something a bit risky, that you feel God is moving you to do.
 - o It could be something large, like us moving away, which, for us, is a huge step of faith into the unknown, trusting that Jesus is leading us... or it could be as small as following the Spirit’s prompting to write a note of encouragement to a co-worker. Just do the next right thing, in faith.
- 2. Practice gratitude – gratitude is one of the best ways to overcome fear. Because gratitude is the practice of being present to the goodness of God in the moment, whereas fear is the feeling of anxiety over possible evil in the future. The more grateful you are, the more you realize how good your life before God is. And the more you grow in faith.
- 4. Get around people of faith. There is a social dimension to faith. Some social environments, like a secular city, decrease our faith, and others, like church, increase it. Jesus said of his home village, he could do no great miracles there because of their lack of faith. Living in a city like Portland is very hard on your faith, hence the need to gather together.
- 5. Finally, ask God for more faith! Like the man’s prayer, that is all our prayer, “I believe, help me overcome my unbelief!” Meaning, I have a low level of faith, but I want a higher one! Grow my faith, God! Faith isn’t just a muscle we develop, it’s a gift we receive.
- And then just wait. One of the greatest signs that we have faith is the ability to calmly wait for God to move.

- But then, there's passive spirituality.
- What Scripture calls the "test of faith."
- But this isn't a test like in school. Where you study hard and fill in the right answer for a grade.
- As the saying goes, In school, you get the lesson, then you take the test. But in the school of life, you get the test, *then* you have a chance to learn the lesson.
- This is why *none* of us get a 4.0 in life, we all fail.
- The test of faith is more like a stress test – the way engineers test a plane or car or a new piece of technology, or the way a blacksmith tests the metal... or a chef tests a dish...
- It's a way to test the integrity or strength or quality of something, to see what it's actually made of. How much strain it can actually take? Is it ready?
- Less for *God* – he already knows all that's in our heart – but for *us*, we often don't.
- When our faith is tested, what we actually believe comes to the surface. We may think we don't need a lot of money to be happy, until the stock markets crashes and we lose it, then we discover what's really inside our heart. We may think we don't get our identity from our work, until we lose our job or transition and all our fears and insecurities come up. We may think we love our children just as they are, until they don't follow our pre-written script for their life, and we get angry and afraid.
- Our family went through a very painful experience recently that I'm not at liberty to disclose, but we had come to believe that our time in Portland was done, and we had made a plan for where to go next and what to do, we had an open door that felt like the fulfillment to what God had put in our hearts many years ago. And I was so excited about it. Then, at the last minute, *all* our plans fell through, in a heartbreaking way.
- All through the discernment process I said, daily, God, your will be done. And I genuinely *thought* I meant it. Until my desired outcome fell through. When my faith was tested, I realized, I don't actually want whatever God has for us; I want this particular thing, and the moment it was in jeopardy, I was stricken by fear, and when it fell through, I was shattered. My face was nothing like Jesus' in that artwork.
- It's been a whole new layer of the false self – exposed, stripped off, and set free.
- But it's called for a whole new level of surrender.

Ending:

- And that's what Christian spirituality is all about, right? Surrender.
- How do we grow our faith in times of testing?
- 1. We surrender. We let go of our attachments. We still *have* desires, but we let go of the *need* for our desires to come to pass to be happy and at peace. We give up the futile attempt to control what we cannot possibly control.
- And 2. We stay faithful to Jesus.

- Even when we're in "the confusing in between," when we don't see the light at the end of the tunnel; when all we see is darkness. We continue to put our trust in Jesus. Our good shepherd.
- This is where the Reformation's definition of faith as either mental ascent to doctrine or a feeling of assurance has done great harm.
- Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit priest and anti-war activist, was once asked, is faith in the head or the heart? He said, Neither. Faith is where your butt's at! (Only he was a bit cheeky and he didn't say butt!) Inside what commitments are you sitting? Within what reality do you anchor yourself?"
- While what we believe in our mind and feel in our heart are of great importance, at the end of the day, faith is where your body is at. Faith is about faithfulness. It's about staying true to Jesus and living inside the contours of your commitments. And watching his plan for your life unfold, one day at a time.

Meditation:

- Let's stand... I just want to curate a little space for you to listen to God's voice...
- We pray Psalm 139:
 - o Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.
- Let me guide you through three questions to ask God. Just hold each one before God, and see what comes to mind...
 - o 1. Where are you in the stages of faith? The faith of religion? Of desperation? Or of surrender?
 - o 2. What's "the next right thing" for you to grow in faith? Is there a small step to take in the coming week?
 - o 3. Finally, God, is there anything you want me to surrender anew to you?