

First Hand Faith

Preached FCCW, October 28, 2018

Job 42:1-6, 10-17 and Hebrews 7:23-28

A new bride was preparing a ham dinner for her parents and in-laws, when her husband noticed that his wife cut off two apparently good ends of the ham before it went into the oven. When he asked her why she did that, she thought about it for a moment, and then said, "That's the way my mother always fixed a ham."

After dinner he asked his wife's mother why she cut the ends off a ham before cooking it. She answered, "I don't know why I do it. I guess it's because that's the way my mother always cooked a ham."

By now, he was really determined to get to the bottom of this mystery, so he made a special trip to his wife's grandmother's house. When he asked her why she cut the ends off a ham before putting it into the oven she said, "We only had one small pan in the house in those days, and cutting the ends off the ham was the only way the ham would fit into the pan."

This story is proof that when all we know about something is what has been passed down to us, and not what we have experienced for ourselves, then what we think we know about it might not be the whole picture.

What is true about baking ham is also true for our faith. Is what you know about God based on what you have heard about God, or what has been passed down to you? Or is your understanding of what God is like also informed by your own personal relationship to God? In other words, is your faith in God, a second hand, or a firsthand faith?

These are questions that bring us to the heart of the Protestant Reformation, which we remember on Reformation Sunday. Reformation Sunday is celebrated on the Sunday closest to October 31, because it was on that date in 1517, that the German monk Martin Luther, nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The 95 Theses were his grievances about certain teachings, doctrines and practices of the Church at that time.

A big motivator for Luther to publish his 95 Theses centered around Pope Leo X's ambition for building a magnificent basilica in Rome. The trouble was, he was short on the cash needed to build it. Today, if a church has a building project it can't afford they might hold a fund-raiser or run a capital campaign. Five hundred years ago, Leo had a similar idea. Leo authorized the sale of "indulgences" to help finance the construction of St. Peter's Basilica. Indulgences were actual certificates that people could purchase from the Church that absolved them, or their loved ones, of their sins and promised their salvation and eternal life without having to do time in Purgatory first.

One of the foremost marketers of these indulgences was a monk named John Tetzel. His catchy sales slogan for promoting his product was: "When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." Tetzel traveled from village to village, preaching in the churches about the horrors of Hell, and offering indulgences for sale as a way of avoiding ending up there. Luther argued that selling shortcuts to

salvation was a distortion of what the Bible taught about salvation being an act of God, which is ours by grace through our faith in Jesus Christ.

There was a time though, when Luther himself might have been a sucker for Tetzel's sales pitch. Early on in his life, Luther pictured God as an angry judge who couldn't wait to throw him into the depths of hell for eternity over his sins. He tried everything he possibly could to try to appease God. He confessed every single sin he could think of, but the harder he tried, the further he fell into despair. Until he was led to a deeper study of scripture, where he found the answers that liberated his soul. What he discovered there did not jibe with the selling of indulgences, and many other doctrines that he had been taught by the Church.

Most of those inconsistencies that he addressed in his 95 Theses were variations of one big deviation from what scripture had to say about salvation. The central truth that sparked the Protestant Reformation was the conviction that salvation is a gift received by faith through a personal relationship with God, through Jesus Christ; not through the mediations of a priest, the prayers of the saints, or our own good deeds. All we need is a first-hand faith in what Jesus did for us. As it says in the Book of Hebrews, Jesus became the one and only intermediary we'll ever need when he offered himself once for all.

The issue of first, versus second hand faith, comes up in the Book of Job. For most of his life, Job's faith was based on what he had been told by others about God, not what he had experienced for himself. Then one day, tragedy strikes, and for the first time, Job begins to question whether or not what he had always believed about God could be trusted. Through the tragedies that befall him Job eventually finds his way to a new intimacy with God. A more direct relationship, not built on what he had always heard about God from others, but grounded in his direct experience of God for himself.

In the end, Job learns to see himself and his tragic circumstances in a new way, because he learns to see God in a new way. He says, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." What Job repents of is the second-hand faith he had lived by; a faith based on hearsay and rumors about God, rather than a personal intimacy with God. He repents of a second-hand faith to make room for a deeper first-hand faith.

Job thought he knew God, based on what he had heard about God through the opinions of his friends and the hand-me-down religious teachings of his youth. But now he sees God for who God truly is, because he has met God in a first-hand encounter. At the end of the Book of Job, there is restitution for all that Job had lost. Renewed wealth, health and family are not the most important blessings that Job receives, though. The blessing that comes before all that – is the gift of a personal relationship with God, where before there was merely a second –hand knowledge about God.

Job wanted answers about why his life had gone down the drain. He didn't get any. That's the way it goes sometimes. When it seems like God isn't giving you what you're looking for, he might be getting ready to give you something else that's even better. What Job did get instead of answers to his questions, was the reality of God's presence. A first-hand faith that withstood even all the trials he had been through. He discovered that when all was lost, and all he had left was God, that God was all he ever really needed. He would never be satisfied with a second-hand faith again, after this experience.

At its best, church should be a place where we do more than passively learn about other people's experiences of God. It ought to be a place that enables us to experience God's presence in a direct, first

hand manner, for ourselves. An outgrowth of the Reformation is, what we call the priesthood of all believers; meaning that Christians do not need an intermediary between them and God. That it is not only the *privilege, but also the duty* of all Christians to explore into their own personal relationship with God, to read the Bible and to pray directly to God rather than letting someone else do it for them.

It is said that God has children, but no grandchildren. In other words, we don't settle on our parents' or anyone else's relationship to God, as a substitute for firsthand faith of our own. Otherwise, our religion can be mechanically going through motions we have learned, without experiencing the substance of a divine connection.

It's OK to inherit someone else's quirky habits for cooking ham without it being a big deal. But, we cannot inherit someone else's faith, or adopt someone else's spiritual experience, as a substitute for our own. Each of us is ultimately responsible for *our own* spiritual journey.

Together, we are responsible for sharing the work of creating and maintaining a community of faith where others can encounter God directly for themselves, by providing opportunities for spiritual growth, and opportunities to channel that growth into serving others in Christ's name. Worship should bring the word of God directly into people's lives in ways that encourage its expression in actions that make God's love real for others.

That's why the Protestant Reformation is not just past history. It is a present and ongoing necessity. The Church must always be reforming itself, so that it always remains true to the message of the gospel.