### “Your Faith” Steve Finlan for The First Church, June 18, 2023

**Romans 5:1–5**

1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

**Matthew 9:18–26**

18 While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” 19And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. 20Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, 21for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” 22Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has [saved] you.” And instantly the woman was made well. 23When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, 24he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. 25But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. 26And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Welcome to First Church. I’m going to talk about your faith today. Well, actually about *anybody’s* faith: how faith functions in our lives. I’ll also talk about fathers, and fatherly love, here on Fathers’ Day.

Let’s start with Paul’s letter to the Romans, where he talks about some of the struggles and achievements of a living faith, proceeding from suffering to endurance to character to hope to the Holy Spirit, which is abundantly poured out upon us. There is a sequence in life that leads us up to the place where we feel the Spirit. Maybe we don’t feel it during the suffering, or even during the endurance-building phase. We start to feel it when we develop character and even moreso when we experience hope. Hope ties in to fulfillment, which can be ours when we experience the guidance of the Spirit.

The gospel gives us an example of a person with faith who encounters Jesus as he is on his way to help someone else. But she needs help herself, and she figures she will get it if she just touches the hem of his garment. How humble is that?! She doesn’t want to disturb the Master or grab his attention, she just wants a little overflow from his spiritual power. And she gets it.

Notice how tender Jesus’ words are: “Take heart, daughter, your faith has saved you” (9:22). He heals her, but I imagine the healing must be much more than just physical. No longer having a bleeding problem, she will no longer represent a threat of impurity to those who are focused on purity. He heals her socially as much as he heals her physically. And probably there is a psychological healing as well. She is afraid, and he speaks kindly to her, calls her daughter, and gives her credit for her own healing. “*Your* faith has saved you.” Actually the NRSV and most other translations have “your faith has made you whole,” because of the physical healing taking place, but the underlying Greek word, *sesoken*, primarily means “has saved,” and can secondarily mean “has healed.” New American Bible, however, agrees with my translation choice, “has saved.”

In any case, it is typical of Jesus that he wants people to be aware of their own part in the healing or saving process, and so he draws attention to her faith. “Your faith has saved you” occurs seven times in the first three gospels. He heals people, but he likes to give some credit to them for exercising their faith. The human faith evoked the divine activity. God reaches down whenever we reach up.

Now this is just the beginning of Jesus’ work that day. He goes on to the house where a young woman has supposedly died. He sends away the mourners and says she has not died, but is sleeping. They laugh at him, but he takes her hand and wakes her up. In this case it is her *family’s* faith that arouses Jesus to act.

It was the father who came to Jesus in the first place. He had tremendous faith in Jesus. He started by saying “my daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live” (9:18). And that is what ended up happening. It was a father’s love that led to this reaching out to Jesus, and the man’s plea was answered. What an astounding response to ordinary fatherly love. It was good to be on earth when Jesus walked here. Imagine the story that this father could tell afterwards.

Fatherly love and motherly love are the most Godlike kinds of love that we humans can practice. Jesus taught that God is a loving father, and he said “the Father himself loves you” (John 16:27). In other words, the Father does not need to be persuaded to love. The Father is not a stern heavenly judge who has to be talked into allowing people to get saved. The Son does not manipulate the Father on behalf of humanity. Father and Son function in complete unity, and have the same love. Jesus revealed the grace of God, grace and graciousness that were already there.

The Old Testament develops, and in fact *over*-develops, the idea of the righteousness of God, putting an emphasis on justice and judgment. In order to hammer home the idea of God’s justice, the prophets tended to over-stress it, at the expense of God’s mercy. I think a kind of over-emphasis happens in all religions; certain truths become central, and then become over-emphasized and thus distorted by people. Hinduism and Buddhism sometimes over-emphasize the idea of non-separation, leading to notions that human personality is just an illusion, that unity is all that exists. Judaism tended to over-emphasize the divine attribute of justice and the prerogative of judgment, leading to anthropomorphized ideas of a punishing and angry God. Jesus tried to bring back the mercy and tenderness of God, and he acted it out in his merciful and kindly deeds.

One thing we can be sure of, Jesus and the Father note our faith and unfailingly respond to it. The response can take many different forms in our lives. We may find we make an important contact with another person, or we may develop a feeling of love or mercy towards someone. We may develop a new interest or desire. Jesus may respond in our environment, or in our hearts and minds, empowering us or pointing us in a certain direction.

A hungering spirit, an honest prayer, will always be answered. Such a prayer is the *only* one that will *surely* be answered. We don’t know what form the answer will take, or when it will arrive, but it is surely answered. One thing at least that will always happen is the expansion and growth of the spiritual nature of the person making a sincere prayer. One becomes capable of receiving more. “Ask and you will receive” (John 16:24). Your spiritual receptivity will grow. And that’s what’s most important. You become more of a conduit for love and truth when you become a better receiver of those qualities.

So I exhort you to carry the image in your mind of God and Jesus reaching down to you, every time you reach up to them. They may not reach down with a nature miracle, but they always reach down with love and spiritual qualities, and those are a *kind* of miracle, every time. Fatherly love is really miraculous in its giving. We learn a little more about God every time we learn more about loving, especially about parental love.