



North Shore  
**Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

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## ***“Christian Discipleship: A Question of Grammar?”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Hebrews 11: 1-12; James 2: 14-26*

*October 27, 2019*

### *Hebrews 11: 1-12*

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. 5 By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and “he was not found, because God had taken him.” For it was attested before he was taken away that “he had pleased God.” 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. 7 By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

I’m going to get to our reading from the letter of James in a couple of minutes, but I first want to spend some time setting the stage. We continue our series, this morning, on our church’s purpose statement, and this week we explore the phrase “Christian Discipleship.” What is it? What does it mean? What does it say about us as people of Christ? What does it look like in our individual and corporate lives both in and outside the context of this church? These questions

are just a few of many on which I have leading up to this morning. But, the more I found myself travelling down those roads, the more I kept looping back to the fundamental question of what it means to have faith – what it means to be a Christian! And, if I'm truly honest about it, the more I chewed on this phrase of 'Christian discipleship,' there was this small part of me that kind of wished it weren't in here at all. Allow me to explain!

I found myself in a conversation with an individual, recently, in which we were talking about the crossover of our faith and our daily living. From politics to financial management, we were discussing the role of faith in the matters of our every day. In the midst of the conversation, the individual made this comment: "It's not that I don't have faith," he said, "I have tremendous faith. It's just that I don't feel that my faith belongs in my secular life." Think about that! "It's just that I don't feel that my faith belongs in my secular life."

Now, perhaps most wouldn't say it quite so succinctly, but I think that statement reflects a worldview that is far more prevalent than we realize. Whether we say that way or not, there is this commonly held notion, out there, that somehow 'faith' can stand apart from 'discipleship.' There is this recurring argument, in countless arenas, in which people claim to have faith in Christ but no interest in participating in 'organized religion,' or no time in their busy lives to 'sit in worship,' or no energy left to spend on ministries and programs. There is this notion that one can have tremendous faith – a deep and meaningful belief in and relationship with God – while constantly upholding the mounting distractions and otherwise priorities that life in the 'secular world' thrusts upon them.

It is all reflective, to me, of a fundamental distinction that goes back to Elementary school English lessons. Now, I am the first to admit that one of the subjects, in school, that did not come easily to me as a child was grammar. To this day, grammar is not my strongest asset. I usually speak reasonably well, and my years of writing mean that I have learned how many of the structures are supposed to flow. If you ask me to sit down and parse a sentence, however, to identify the dangling participle or to re-phrase a sentence to take it out of the passive voice, you are going to find my responses lacking. I never did well with the identification of prepositions and predicates. But, I do know the difference between a noun and a verb. And, my struggles with this phrase, this week, have stemmed from the underlying reality that that when it comes to understanding faith, when it comes to understanding what it means to be a Christian, we usually get it wrong.

Consider these reflections that we get in the letter to the Hebrews. Consider the examples that the author portrays as the true exemplars of faith. Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, the list goes on of these individuals that are elevated to be the true prototypes of faith. These are the people who are lifted up, that we might see what it means to have faith. These are the people who serve as the examples of living in faith. What is important to note, however, is that all of these people, all of these examples, all of these stories, have two things in common. First, yes, they all believe. All of these people have a conviction of the presence and power of God in their lives, and in this world. But, then, they act on that belief.

- Abel's belief was made real in the offerings he made to God.
- Noah's belief was made real when he listened to God's instructions and built the ark.

- Abraham’s belief was made real when he traversed that mountain and tied down his only son to provide him as an offering to God.
- Moses’ faith was made real when he cast aside his prosperity and embraced the burden of his people.
- Rahab’s faith was made real when she welcomed those men in need of her help.

All of these examples have in common, of course, the fundamental trust in God and God’s presence in their lives. They also have in common, however, the fact that that they sought and found ways to make that belief real, palpable, manifest in some authentic way in their lives. These are not people who sat at home watching endless infomercials for the latest craze in home health or the greatest new way to vacuum their floors. These are people who took their beliefs and acted on them. And right then, when they turned their conviction into action, that, I suggest, is when their belief became faith.

This is what brings us to our passage from James. It is a familiar one to many of you, I know, as we have explored it before. And, it is one that carries particular meaning for us, as these are the verses that are why our son’s given name is James. These words come from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the letter of James, starting with the 14<sup>th</sup> verse:

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. 20 Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. 23 Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? 26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

“Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.” You see, what I’m trying to get at here is that, historically, we have classified faith, we have classified being a Christian, as a noun. Faith, Christianity, we suggest, is something that is, something that we hold on to, something that we know. But, every time we do that we miss the point! If we really understand the nature of faith, we understand that faith, that Christianity, is a verb. It’s is not something we have, it is something we do. Beliefs? Belief is a noun. We can have whatever beliefs we want. We can lay in bed all day eating bonbons and hold on to whatever beliefs we wish. But, that’s not faith – that’s

not being Christian. It is not until we are so compelled by our beliefs that we can't help but find a way to make them real in life – it is not until we are so motivated by the grace and love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ that we have to manifest those beliefs in the living out of our lives – it is not until we are so driven by our conviction that we act on our beliefs – that we can claim to know faith, that we truly own the title of being a Christian. Belief is a noun, it is something we can just have. Faith...Christianity...however, that's a verb. It is something we do.

Did you know that, in the earliest days of the church there was no such thing as a Christian? It wasn't until Acts 11 that we first see that title used. In the interim, they were followers – sometimes called 'Followers of the Way.' Imagine what would change if we returned to that early notion that stood behind the Christian identity? What would happen if we harkened back to the days where the very identity of our spiritual existence included an active component of being a follower of the one whose name we bear? What would happen if we shifted our grammatical understanding of faith – of what it means to be a Christian – and we stopped viewing them as nouns and started seeing them for the verbs that they are?

As we came towards today's our service on this topic of "Christian Discipleship," my mind was overrun with the plethora of paths and directions in which that exploration could travel. The more I reflected on the phrase, however, the more I struggled with it. Not because I don't think the concept should be there – and most certainly not because I think that being active in discipleship isn't core to who and what we need to be as a church – but because the very phrase reinforces that notion that the two can be separated. Using the phrase "Christian discipleship" gives off this notion that you could be one without the other – that Christianity (that faith) is a noun that can be separated from the verb. And, frankly, I'm not sure there is a more damaging notion to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity than this very concept that we can have one without the other.

That is why I was so taken by that quote from CS Lewis that was placed as our Call to Meditation this morning, and it has been ringing through my mind for days. "Christians have often disputed as to whether what leads to the Christian home is good actions, or faith in Christ...it does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary." Theologians have spent centuries debating the foundation of salvation – is it grace, is it belief, is it works... And, as far as I'm concerned, they can spend centuries more, because I am convinced that they are arguing over which blade in a pair of scissors is more important. You can't divorce them in that way! You can't treat them as separate and distinct. CS Lewis named it...Hebrews claimed it...James made it abundantly clear in his letter...You simply cannot have one without the other.

When? How? In what circumstances, ways and times? The manifestation of our Christian identity has more opportunities and possibilities than we could ever dream to imagine. But, as we look more and more towards the future that God is laying out for this church, imagine what would change if we returned to that early notion that stood behind the Christian identity? Imagine what would happen if we harkened back to the days where the very identity of our spiritual existence included an active component of being a follower of the one whose name we bear? Imagine what would happen if we shifted our grammatical understanding of faith – of what it means to be a Christian? Imagine what would happen – in our lives, in the life of this

church, and in the world that surrounds us – if we stopped viewing Christianity as a noun, and started seeing it for the verb that it is meant to be?