



RECLAIMING RELIGIOUS
LANGUAGE SERIES

MARCH 1 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

FAITH

“You got to have faith, faith, faith. You got to have faith, faith, faith. Well, you got to have faith, the faith, the faith. You got to have faith, the faith, the faith.”

Have a good day. That's all you need is George Michael and faith. I mean, that might be true. But here's God's honest truth, friends. Whenever I've got a sermon kicking around, I've got a theme going on in my head. All week, all month, whatever, how much lead up time I've got. Every song that has that theme in it is kicking around this noggin that you see up here. And I have to fight sometimes, sometimes I got to fight to keep those songs out of the sermon and I just ... Some of you catch the little glimpses here and there, but I just gave in this week and started singing faith, faith, faith.

That's because the subject of today's sermon in our Lenten series about reclaiming religious language is, it might not come as a surprise to you, faith. But the list of songs running through my head, I think one of my favorites was like Faith. It was a song about confidence. I Have Confidence from the sound of music. So there I was this week doing bell kicks down the street with my guitar in hand and all my worldly possessions to take care of some sad children in Vienna. Sorry. Where am I? What's going on? But confidence, I discovered as I was hoping to quote that song, it's not faith. It's something else. It only sounds like faith. I'm not going to sing it.

So a lot of songs we hear, a lot of things we hear in this world sound like faith. Courage, hope, religion, trust. There's a pull to use these words at times for faith interchangeably, but just take one of them. Religion, for example. Religion and faith are probably the two I hear most often interchange, but religion describes the outward practices that we repeat or we engage in that give us a sense of belonging of something like that. But faith is the inward feeling we have that connects us to something

greater than us. The two work together, but they're not the same. They're not just interchangeable. Some would say they can even be at odds because part of religion by nature sometimes doesn't change. But faith changes in us. It changes through us. It changes us all the time.

Christian Wyman from the reading talks about this. He says, "Even the staunchest life of faith is a life of great change. It follows that if you believe at 50 what you believed at 15, then you have not lived or have denied the reality of your life." Denied the reality of your life, denied change in your life. This is why when I explain that I'm part of a progressive faith, what I mean is that it's a faith that grows, that progresses along with history, along with new information we learn because of choice. Of course, life changes, so must my faith, and that is what part of a progressive faith means. I dare say, if you don't have a progressive faith, one that grows, adapts and changes, what you have might not be faith. It might be something else.

So what though, what is your faith? Don't answer aloud. It's not one of those places. I mean, I guess maybe it could be. We could have an altar call up here. But answer it for yourself. What really is the answer? And I do mean for yourself, not what is faith, this thing out here. What is your faith? Not the answer you give strangers at the gas pump, not the ethical concerns that you think this church may share with you. Not even the name on the sign outside. None of that. What's your faith? It's not a new question, I'm sure. It has some old answers. How about this one? "Faith is the substance of things hoped for. The evidence of things not seen." Who said that? Anyone?

Not sure. Okay. It's good. It's a description of faith that's contained in the letter many call simply Hebrews today, the epistle to the Hebrews. It's a letter believed for a long time to be written by Paul of Tarsus, St. Paul, to a group of Jewish people he was trying to convince to follow the ways of Jesus, to join the movement of the Christian church in the period between '32 and '70 in the common era. Now, I know I ran Paul down a little bit last week from up here because of some things in his writing I don't agree with, right? So this week, I won't do that. I'll let other people do that.

See, scholars found over time that though the epistles of the Hebrews has been attributed to Paul, there's no way he actually wrote it. And you know why the scholars have found this out? You want to guess how they determined it wasn't Paul? It's too well written. That's one of those sick Bible scholar burns. Can't be Paul. Too good. It's the original AI cheating detectors of our schools. In fact, recent theories are actually that members of this growing Christian movement who supported it, who's held small meetings in their homes, lay people who were highly educated are who probably wrote this letter. And some theorized, in fact, it was one of the leaders of those church, a woman named Priscilla, who with her husband, Aquila, was an early supporter of Paul's efforts. And she may have penned the epistle because it looks like some of the other things that she wrote herself based on some of the clues in it.

Because you better believe that ladies wrote the Bible too. That's right. I know. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." The quote itself discloses part of the challenge of faith, and it's different for each one of us. I know it requires placing a level of our assurance, of our hope, of our belief in something we may not glimpse fully, may not entirely understand, or maybe

even have a conflict with. It was in World War I in the trenches, that awful war, that a young Lutheran chaplain named Paul Tillich saw firsthand what warring ideas can do. He buried his best friend there and scores of other young men, boys, really, and emerged from the war and decided that teaching and education about ideas and about belief is what he was called to do.

One of the most celebrated theologians here to work in the United States, German, started German, came to the US. So if you're looking for a good start for understanding some of the special qualities of faith and why it's different than anything else, Dynamics of Faith by Paul Tillich is a good place to start. In it, he defines faith like this. "The state of being, ultimately concerned." Ultimate, of course, means finally, totally, and completely, and perhaps this is not the time or the place to add one more thing to the list of concerns I know many of you are walking in here with. One more thing to be ultimately concerned about.

So instead, imagine you're a lighthouse. I know. And there's light coming out of you aiming at something, out of your being at something. And that thing you're aiming at has all your focus, has all of your light going toward it. It's virtually the only thing really visible from around the whole circle. And that, what you are seeing is your ultimate concern, final, ultimate. And he says, "The content matters infinitely to the life of the believer, but does not matter for the formal definition of faith." So upon what you're casting your light matters for you, and it should matter to you a lot. Perhaps more than anything else, he says infinitely important, but none of what actually concerns you, the things you're thinking about, none of that ultimate concern is what makes what you are feeling faith. There is a difference.

All it does is that state you are in, that casting of your light at something is the act. This state is defining you as having faith. "Faith," he says, is the most centered act of the human mind," the most centered act of the human mind. So let me ask you another question. What is the most centered thought in your mind today? What is really on your mind? Let's lighten you up. It could be world affairs, of course, could be health concerns, yours or others. The welfare of children's often on my mind, especially when wars are breaking out. Could be your family, things you're struggling with. Perhaps it's the beginning of open warfare in these past days that holds the potential of more catastrophe in a region where suffering seems to stalk so many unrelentingly, the birthplace of so many religions.

Tillich would ask you here to pause and to look deeply and to really follow every concern you're thinking of to the end, to its final source. And it's a good challenge to do, especially for people in a church, especially for people in a faith that seems to have the next concern and the next concern piling onto our shoulders, our spiritual hearts all the time. What is the next thing? What more must I do? So take one thing, for example. We have voting in the primaries coming up. Who's getting ready to vote in the primaries? Who's already voted in the primary? Oh, yeah. All right. Man, is it possible to love them more? I don't know. You guys. You guys are doing it. It's good.

Okay, so take that. This is something of concern, but maybe the bigger concern is being sure, sure that as many people are voting as can, maybe everyone on your block. So that's the bigger concern

than you voting, because fairness is my bigger concern. The more voices, the more fairness, right? So if fairness is my biggest concern, maybe then I know that a lack of fairness means less resources for some of the people in this city and parts of this city, and those resources or lack of them could have deadly consequences in the lives of my neighbors. Maybe that is an even bigger concern. And maybe I truly believe that bringing equity and a better life for all can bring about an even greater world none of us yet can even glimpse or imagine. Maybe the beloved community here in our midst, which is just an expression of God.

That is what Tillich would want you all to think through. Faith, your ultimate concern. And wouldn't it be grand if everyone thought about faith this way? But Emily Dickinson warns us in immaculate tidy verse that it just ain't so. She says, "Faith is a fine invention for gentlemen who see, but microscopes are prudent in an emergency." The Bell of Amherst saw and knew one of the first things that Tillich points out as certainly not being part of faith. His words, "The most ordinary interpretation of faith is to consider it an act of knowledge and that has a low degree of evidence. Something more or less probable or improbable is affirmed in spite of the insufficiency of its theoretical substantiation. In other words, despite all evidence to the contrary, my faith makes it so." That idea.

Evidence is used to form a belief. Yes. Then a person relies on that belief he trusts, they trust, she trusts. Tillich warns about faith, warns it is not a gap filler. He warns against seeing some holes in a theory based on a lack of evidence, decides how you kind of want to go and then what the outcome's going to be and then saying your faith made it true. That's the danger. It may also be trust in an authority on something like, I don't know, some guy getting in front of you and singing you George Michael tunes, then asking you to consider maybe a woman has written one of the most quoted parts of the entire Christian scriptures when a guy has been taking credit for it for 2,000 years.

Good Lord, who ever heard of such a thing? That's right. You can trust maybe an authority. You can believe, you can even consider one before you, but Tillich and I tell you, do not mistake that for faith. Do not mistake that for being the state of being ultimately concerned in something and its consequences, because doing that has real consequences. It was this week in 1910 on March 3rd when the lynching of Alan Brooks in Dallas, Texas happened, friends, this week. The accusation against Brooks, who was a domestic worker in a person's home was that he had abused a child in that home, a two and a half year old. The case never went forward. No evidence was considered, even to form a reliable belief in what occurred.

Rather, he was dragged from the window of the second story courtroom while sitting beside a member of this church, actually, his attorney, who was assigned as counsel that morning because his previous counsel had quit and because the judge knew it was the only attorney in town who would take the case, a member of this church. But even his defender appointed wasn't able to stop the crowd. Even the fact finder before them, the judge did not put a stop to it. I'm told even the police who tried to intervene did not use their firearms, only yelled and tried to get people to stop. As Brooks was dragged to Achored and Main and hanged there as thousands, thousands of people in Dallas gathered children among them for what was popular amusement at the time until his body was taken down by the police.

Mob rule, orchestrated passionate violence by a group spurred by hate, encouraged by the appalling fallacy of white supremacy and slaking the thirst for blood of a man against whom no evidence had been presented is the horrible, the horrible dimension faith can take. As a trenched chaplain and as an observer of man's treatment of others, Tillich knew what feted ideas parading as faith have the power to do in the history of the world to cause massive suffering. Tragedy unfolds, I know in our own lives because there is a separation, there's a distance, a time between who we are and what we hold as our ultimate concern. Where we're going, our faith, because in that distance between the two are all kinds of messages that we can get confused about. All manner of things can go wrong on that wide sea. So how are we so sure we are moving toward that ultimate concern and that it is good?

Tillich explains that faith needs action to find, to get to, to meet that ultimate concern. And the faithful and the ultimate concern are joined together in that action across that distance by what faithful people of every age have been joined by doing. They are found in the action of love. The longing for union between us and what is our ultimate concern spurs the faithful to love better, to love into action. And action is only possible in what? In relation to others. Therefore, faith is only possible in a community that takes action. Amen.

Understanding that faith can be misunderstood, can be twisted and turned is this truth everywhere. The exertion of will to wield power, to make hate or vilification of others popular. The false object of ultimate concern or to take advantage of others for your own personal gain. These things are all around us. They're on the front page of local and national international news. All times, they are with us. We're in the trenches friends of our own lives and of the shape of this world. Each one of us, even as war itself, the full inversion of the idea of a loving God rages again around the world.

So it's here. In a community, community that changes, that grows, that holds and sees, sees and values each of you, each of us for exactly who we are, for how we look, for the way gender is beautifully expressed in our lives, for the way we love others and the beauty that that holds, for the way we create a community that is always changing, that supports the vision we each strive to hold of each of our own personal, ultimate concerns. It's here in a community that does not cast anyone outside the circle of love and blesses every way the faithful set aside their worldly clamors for the sake of a future that is better for all, for all. That gives us each the best chance of bringing about a world blessed by each of our ultimate concerns. It takes a lot to be a person of faith today.

It takes courage. It takes trust. It takes religion sometimes and even church. It takes your energy. It takes your time, I know, and it takes discernment in the face of so many temptations. It may even take your life. But the distance that we travel from our own selves to a wider concern for this world is the hallmark of a faith that changes with you and for you. It's the breadth of a church that holds this hurting world or tries, and it is the full measure of devotion traveled together in love toward the ultimate. It does take a lot to begin that journey to open that door. But in the words of the prophet

'It takes a strong man, baby, but I'm showing you that door, because you got to have faith. You got to have faith. Because you got to have faith, the faith, the faith. You got to have faith, the faith, the faith.'

May it ever be so, blessed be an amen. That's right.