

Sermon
June 11, 2023

A Few Words that Could Change Your Life
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Grace to you and peace from God the Creator, from God the Healer, from God the Sustainer, Amen.

Let me ask you a question.

Does your faith as a Christian primarily concern itself with this life and how we live it? Does your faith compel you to seek new life in the here and now?

Or do you see this life – as Rick Warren does, the famous pastor of the Southern California Saddleback Church – primarily as “a rehearsal for trillions and trillions of years with God”? One where you and I, as Christians, will spend eternity in the Divine Presence?

Of course, I know what some of you might be thinking; “It’s both!” But that’s not the question I’m asking. I want to know what serves as the *primary* focus of your faith. Is it choosing life before God, on *this* side of the grave, or is faith for you primarily about going to heaven on the *other* side of the grave? So here, or hereafter – which is the focus, primarily, of your faith?

Now, I ask these questions not to torture you or to give you a Sunday morning headache. I ask them because they pertain directly to our readings for today.

Let’s start with the Gospel. Here Jesus is criticized for the company he keeps, for associating with tax collectors and sinners. These groups were the marginalized, the outcasts of society. They were regarded, in the case of tax collectors, with suspicion. They were regarded, in the case of sinners, with condemnation and judgment.

Next, we hear about the synagogue leader who asks Jesus to bring his daughter back to life. And before Jesus can respond, however, we learn of a woman who has been hemorrhaging, which is to say she has been bleeding for 12 years, who grasps the fringes of his cloak. It’s a desperate act of faith, or trust in Jesus’s healing power. And it works. It works! Her faith, Jesus confirms, has made her well.

After that, finally, Jesus brings the synagogue leader’s daughter back to life.

Now, if I look back on a day like that, I’d say to myself, I did a pretty good job: brought somebody back from the dead, healed a woman who had been suffering a malady for 12 years, and reintegrated outsiders into a new community of fellowship.

And it’s easy to isolate these stories. First, Jesus redefines community by making “outsiders” insiders. Or the second: Jesus restores a woman’s health. Or the third: Jesus gives new life to a young girl. But the Gospel of Matthew, I believe, keeps them together for a reason. Each of these stories belongs to a broader pattern of Jesus’s ministry. One where his actions, his teachings, and his acts of healing – which is the most common miracle in the New Testament – all characterize the emerging kingdom

God has sent Jesus, God's ambassador, to bring about. Here, outsiders – again, sinners and tax collectors – are reintegrated into the community from which they had been ostracized, turning the status quo upside down. Here, people who are sick or broken are restored in body, mind and spirit. And here, new life, new life appears such that even death momentarily loses its grip. Jesus the Physician has come to bring life – where's that in popular American religious discourse? – Jesus the Physician has come to bring life to heal, not only what our Hymn of the Day refers to as our "sin-sick souls," but *society itself*, as evident in the revolutionary act of a rabbi sitting with sinners and tax collectors.

Now, let's return to our question. When Jesus says to the bleeding woman, "Your faith has made you well," he clearly affirms salvation *in the present tense*. The faith Jesus praises did not concern itself with life after death. The focus instead was on healing in this life; the restorative power God makes available to each of us through Jesus the Christ, here and now.

We see the same thing in Romans 4, our second reading for today. Take a look if you'd like at verse 17. There the Apostle Paul, the most widely-read author in the history of Western civilization, (Can you imagine that; if somebody was reading your emails? that's what we're reading here: correspondence Paul wrote to build up the various communities in Christ throughout Asia Minor) there Paul affirms, using Abraham's absolute trust in God as an example, the healing power, or benefits of faith, in the here and now. The saving power of faith in the here and now. "God gives life to the dead for those who trust in God, as Abraham did," says Paul.

Faith of this caliber not only moves mountains, it moves prophets, like Hosea in our first reading, to declare, in the midst of despair and defeat, in the midst of catastrophe and loss, in the dwindling numbers of Israel, and perhaps in the dwindling numbers of church today, that God will restore God's people. Not after they die. But in this life.

It not only moves mountains or prophets, it also moves patriarchs, as we see with Abraham. Take a look, if you will, at verses 20–21 in our second reading. Our translation says – and normally I don't challenge the New Revised Standard Version. (I do have problems, as you know, with the NIV, but I don't typically our problems with our translation.) Today, however, is an exception. It says, "No distrust made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being convinced that God was able to do what God had promised."

"Abraham grew strong in his faith," according to our translation.

The New Testament Greek, however, says something different, and this blew me away. Instead of indicating Abraham "grew strong in his faith," it says he was "empowered by his faith." He was empowered by his faith, the glory of which went to God. His faith, in other words, made him well.

Now wait a minute, pastor, a few of you might be thinking. I agree that faith calls us to a new way of life, or to new life itself. And I agree that faith can carry us through dark

times and restore us, especially after the experience, say, of major loss. And I even agree – I can't believe I agree with you on three points, pastor, but I even agree – the focus of today's reading centers on the restorative power, the healing and renewal that faith can bring to us on this side of the grave. But what about a passage like Romans 10:9, where Paul says, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved?"

You *will* be saved. Doesn't that mean that Christian faith, while having some implications for life on this side of the grave, is ultimately about the next? Here, I submit, things get especially interesting. Remember what Jesus says to the woman who touched his cloak? Your faith – better translated, your trust – has made you well. "Your trust has made you well."

Well, Paul in Romans 9 uses the same Greek words for belief, or rather faith in this case, and "being made well." Most translations like ours render them, instead of faith and being made well, "belief" and "salvation." So again: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that he was raised, you will be saved."

The Greek words, on the other hand, suggest another translation. And Paul here uses the *same* Greek words we see in Matthew's Gospel for today. Let me modify Romans 10:9 accordingly: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and trust, *trust* in your heart, that God raised Him from the dead, *you will be made well.*"

You hear that? This isn't some far-off prize. "You will be made well" – *now*. Trusting your future lies in God's hands will free you to live in the present, and empower you, as it did for Abraham, to face your trials. There is saving power, in other words, in faith itself – and we pray for that healing power, that saving power, of course, in terms of what happened with Susan earlier.

Dear Friends in Christ, do you see how a few words could change your life, or at least modify your faith? Instead of *believing* in order to be *saved*, you are invited to *trust* in order to be *empowered and healed*! That healing, that salvation, may well extend beyond the grave, to be sure, but just imagine if, like the cloak of Christ, you can reach out for it *in this life* and experience its healing, saving, restorative powers *now*!

And so, we return to the question with which we began: Does your faith as a Christian primarily concern itself with God's promises of new life and healing on *this* side of the grave? Or do you seek solace primarily in the life of the world to come?

Where does the accent fall for you?

The answer is yours to ponder.

Amen.