

Taking Faith Seriously Is Dangerous

Have you noticed how much we use fake things. We use fake stone and fake brick and fake wood trim in our houses. We use fake leather for wallets and belts. We use laminate products that mimic marble or wood. We photo-shop pictures to make ourselves look good. Now, in general, that's fine. But with people, it's not ok. During the elections we don't like it when our politicians tell us they're 'this' way when they're actually *that* way. We don't want to find out that the sports figure who set records turns out to have taken growth hormones. We want the contractor who comes to put a roof on our house or the plumber who fixes the pipes to be a good, competent, honest person.

With the people who serve us we have high standards – we want them to be the genuine article. But the problem is most people have higher standards for other people than we do for ourselves. We want others to be 100% honest and authentic. With ourselves we're willing to fudge a bit. But in our personal lives we should be the real deal - authentic.

The world is waiting for people who will be genuine; for people who will live their faith; for people who claim to be followers of Jesus to actually be credible; to really match what they say they believe with the way they act. James 2:14 says *"Dear brothers and sisters. What's the use of saying you have faith if you don't prove it by your actions."* We're going to talk today about three dangerous but necessary things the world is waiting to see in believers.

First, the world is waiting to see people who will **1. Live Their Faith with Authenticity**. We have to be willing to be transparent, vulnerable, and genuine. Whether it's politicians selling favors or sports groups fudging lab reports to disguise performance enhancing drugs, what's hidden tends to come out into the open eventually. You can hide for a while but eventually truth comes out. Jesus said in Luke 12:2, *"The time is coming when everything that is covered up will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all."*

An authentic follower of Jesus is a novelty in our world. They've seen so many who go to church but don't do much else. They've seen a lot of people following one tradition or another who don't look like the sort of follower Jesus describes. They've seen people who equate politics with faith - whether conservative politics or liberal politics. They've seen people who are critical or who bad-mouth their own churches and church leaders or who are critical of other churches or their leaders. When they meet someone who's different; someone living the Christian life authentically, it's a refreshing experience; it stands out in our jaded, cynical world.

God wants us to be people who live genuinely; people willing to take an honest look at our faults, weaknesses, sins and struggles. People who come to God to confess, receive forgiveness and grace and then to go back into the world as people who aren't faking it; people who are the real deal; who are loving. We tell people that God is love. We say that the church is a safe and loving place. We tell people that we too are imperfect, saved by the grace of God. If we don't act like those things are true, why should they believe any of it?

In Psalm 32:5 David said, *"Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the Lord.' And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone."* The world is sick of people who pretend; who claim they are spiritually mature, who have all kinds of advice for others, but won't admit that they fail and need to grow themselves. Millennial generation young adults in particular are waiting for people who make their faith credible by being genuinely excited about what they believe, act like they really believe and admit that they have a long way to go.

Now, hear me: It's not your reputation or mine that we're concerned about here. It's the reputation of Jesus Christ. When people claim to be followers of Christ and behave in ways inconsistent with that, ways that disappoint people, make them doubt our belief, then we've harmed his name, not just our own. When we claim to be loving and then post unloving, critical things on line, or say critical things about people who are trying to do good; when we complain about other believers publically, we aren't just hurting our own credibility, we're hurting Christ's credibility. It's not just for your benefit or even for the benefit of the people who watch you. It's because Jesus' reputation is at stake.

I think the world is also waiting for people who will **2. Live Their Faith with Courage**. We talked about being part of the resistance to evil last week but I want to spend a little bit more time on it. There are generally three possible reactions people have to the idea of becoming part of the resistance:

One is to say, "I'm in! I don't care what it costs; what price I have to pay or how afraid I am. I'm in!" Then there are those who react by saying, "I'd like to be in but I don't know if I have what it takes; if I've got that kind of courage; if I can do what God asks." They're afraid of what it may take, of what they may lose. Then there are

those who say, "I believe, but it's just part of my life. I have other concerns just as important to me or more important." Finally, there are those who say, "I know I should care, but honestly I'm just not there."

For those who are afraid, let me say this: we're all just ordinary people. If you're a hesitant resistance fighter, you can take heart. There are great stories in the Bible of others who have been in similar circumstances.

We tend to see Paul as bold and never fearful. After all he was shipwrecked, bitten by snakes, thrown in prison, whipped, beaten, starved. The things that happened to him as a follower of Jesus were pretty terrifying. We think this is a man who's strong and fearless, but even Paul had his times of anxiety. Look at how he describes himself in 1 Corinthians 2:3, "*I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling.*" Courage isn't the lack of fear. It's deciding something is more important than fear; it's worth having to experience fear.

I've discovered in my own life that very often the thing I'm afraid of turns out to be the very thing I'm supposed to do. If I'm worrying about it, God is probably working on it. There's a good chance that whatever it is you're afraid of – some barrier, some task, just saying yes to God – is something God's going to work on in your life.

Is that because God's mean? No. It's because God's constantly teaching us to trust God. No matter what your fear is, no matter what your anxiety is about it, God will be there with you helping you learn to trust. So, what are you afraid of? In 1 Chronicles 28:20 David says to his son Solomon before Solomon starts a very ambitious project, "*Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Don't be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you...*" God will be with you.

For those of us who are fearful or anxious or not sure they've got what it takes, the Bible is encouraging and offers hope and the reassurance that God is with us.

But God has warnings for those who have their own agenda or for those who say, "I don't care". They hear about fighting evil, caring for people and surrendering their life, but they have other plans. Luke 12 includes a story about a man with goals for his life. He wants to have plenty. He was a man absorbed in his work and his very successful business. They didn't have our finance system so he didn't put his money in savings, bonds or stocks. He just built more and more barns. He kept accumulating wealth until finally he came to the stage of life where it was time for him to retire. This is what he said in Luke 12:19 "*I'll sit back and say to myself, 'My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!'*"

But God's response to this man who had lived a self-involved life was to say in Luke 12:20-21, "*You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for? Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God*"

In Acts 20 Paul had been in Ephesus for three years. He'd started the church. Paul helped disciple them and they're growing in the Lord. Then God tells him "I want you to go to Jerusalem. And you'll face imprisonment and death there.

Now you'd figure that if someone had faced all that Paul had faced, who had struggled with a physical condition that left them in constant physical pain, who had been very faithful and successful at building a ministry and helping people, would be able to retire or at least take it easy at this point. You would figure that this would be the time in Paul's life when he would say, "God, I've done the hard work. I've faced my fears. I've served you. I've put up with a whole lot more than most people have ever put up with. I think that I'm done. Someone else can take that on now."

But Paul doesn't say that. In Acts 20:24 Paul says, "*...my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.*" This verse encapsulates what it means to have a relationship with God.

So you have a choice and a decision. You can either let your fear and inadequacies or your desire for comfort or your other concerns stop you and be like the guy who God told at the end of his life, "You have been a fool" or you can trust that God will be with you and give you grace and all that you need to do what God's calling you to do.

A third thing the world is waiting for is people who will **3. Live Their Faith with Abandon**. People who realize the cost but give themselves anyway. People who will sacrifice. In 1 Corinthians 14:1 it says "*Let love be your highest goal.*" A simple, elegant, straight-forward phrase. But in my experience people have other things as their primary goal - the pursuit of security, of comfort; the pursuit of wealth; their house; being the best at a sport; being the best worker. The Bible says, "*Let love be your highest goal.*"

In the Old Testament, God had very prescribed, precise ways for people to worship God. It involved sacrifice of agricultural resources – animals and plants. God laid out precisely which animals to use, how to do it, what the sacrifice meant. It was very precise and regimented.

When Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice, those animal sacrifices stopped. But God still requires sacrifice from us – a sacrifice of our whole selves; a sacrifice that helps us become more like Jesus. God requires that we love, care and share in sacrificial ways. Hebrews 13:16 says, “...*don't forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God.*” God isn't interested in animal sacrifices, God's interested in how you demonstrate sacrificial love.

Many people desperately sacrificial love. James 1:27 mentions the most vulnerable people of that time. It says, “*Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.*” Widows and orphans were the most vulnerable, the most at risk then. In the United States, in our time, widows suffer loss, grief, economic consequences and heartache, certainly. But in our culture, women have rights. Women have opportunities. Life can go on. My Gramma Hazel was a widow for over 20 years. She missed my grandfather terribly, but she had a good life with support from people and sufficient financial resources.

But widows in Biblical times and widows outside of developed nations today aren't in that situation. Women married at a very young age and never had schooling. They had no job training outside the home, no skills to bring to another workplace. When their husband died, they were left by themselves, usually with a bunch of kids. They had no property rights. Many times other family members came in and took their land and home and put them on the streets with children and no income. They were extremely vulnerable.

Widows and orphans were the most likely to get sick, the most likely to be homeless. Kids who were orphaned ended up on the streets, some from the time they were two or three years old. There were people who preyed on them.

In our world, outside of the developed countries, widows and orphans are still among the most vulnerable. There are people who still prey on them and often people will use them in the sex trade

I know people who were in Rwanda talking to a pastor friend, Antoine. Antoine was telling them about the orphans in his church. He said this with tears on his face. He said “I met a young man on the street a while ago that had grown up in my church. So I said hello to him and I said, ‘Praise Jesus!’, because he had grown up in my church. The young man said, ‘I no longer respond to that greeting.’ I said, ‘Why not?’ He said, ‘Because I was an orphan and your church did not care for me. You did not help with my school fees.’”

Now if you didn't know, most of the education around the world isn't free. It's free here but most of us don't realize that it rarely is outside of the most developed countries and almost never in poor countries. So orphans can't pay to go to school.

This young boy said, “You didn't help pay my school fees. But some Muslims came to me and said, ‘We will pay your school fees.’ They showed me in your Bible where it said, ‘True and right religion is to take care of orphans and widows in their distress. They said, ‘We are the true religion because we are the ones taking care of you.’ So I no longer respond to greetings about Jesus Christ.”

Antoine, with tears pouring down his face said to the group, “We have twelve orphans in my church now and we pay their school fees.”

God very clearly tells us that if you want to know the authenticity of your walk with Jesus, make sure that you are taking care of vulnerable people. We can sit here and we can say, “Yeah but there are limitations in my life; I have financial struggles I'm too old, too tired, too busy, too something.” It's real easy to get caught up in what you **can't** do. There's a quote by coach John Wooden. He said “Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.” Paul said, “I can do ALL things through the One who strengthens me.”

So I want to give you five action steps that are things every one of us can do; Things within the reach of everyone here; things that can bring God's peace to hearts. These five action steps express God's PEACE.

P - The first step is offer your **Presence**. While it's true that we don't all have equal capabilities - we don't have equal amounts of money; we're in different seasons of life; we each have limitations, there's one thing you have to give no matter what is in your life. You can give your presence.

There are situations we simply can't fix. I wish we could bring solutions to every person but there are many situations where we can't. But we **can** bring our presence and it's our most powerful and profound gift. Just *show*

up. Show up in the lives of your family; in the lives of your co-workers; in the lives of your neighbors. Everyone can do that.

E - The second thing you can offer is **Empathy**. This is one step further than just being there with the person. Be understanding; feel their pain. It's more than simple sympathy. It's choosing to let what wounds them wound you; what hurts them to hurt you. What causes grief to them to cause grief to you. It is embracing pain and suffering that's not your own.

This is exactly what Jesus did for us. He came to not only be with us, he took that next step. He took our pain, our sorrows and our burdens on himself. We can't carry the sin of another person like Jesus does, but we can help carry their sorrow and burdens. The Bible says in Galatians 6:2 "*Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.*" What is the law of Christ? Love God. Love your neighbor. Love one another as Christ loves us. Those are his commands. That's the law of Christ. If you want to fulfill it, share other's burdens.

But most times you can do even more. **A** - Offer to **Assist**. You can lend a hand; help in practical ways. Galatians 6:3 says, "*If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important.*"

Do we need to go over again what Jesus had to say about this? In Matthew 25:45 Jesus said, "*I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.*" Your help is God's help for someone. When you reach out to them, your hand is God's hand for someone. Not someone else's hand. **Your hand** is God's hand of help for someone.

Over the next three years we're going to be developing MANY new opportunities to be God's hands here at EUMC. Let me say this straight out. It may seem strange, but here it is: Evangelical United Methodist Church is going to change the world. EUMC is going to change the world. Say it with me: EUMC is going to change the world. We won't be able to change everything, but we're going to be part of some huge initiatives and we're going to make a big difference.

C - Count On God - Some of you may feel like your situation makes it impossible for you to be the person who does ministry, but it's not about your circumstances, God looks at your heart. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "*People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*" God knows your limitations, knows your weaknesses, knows your struggles, but if your heart is right, God will help you figure out how to serve. You can depend on God for help. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says, "*My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.*" God wants to use you as a dangerously surrendered follower of Christ. God doesn't want you to take on the world yourself. God wants you to work within this body, the Church, and God wants you to do it now - today.

We always have to remember that you can't do any real good unless you are really connected to the only one who's truly good. To God. That means we have to **E - Embody God's Presence**. Yes we need to be present ourselves as people, but we have to remember that when we are present, God is present. Over and over in the Bible God says, "*I will be with you. I will be with you!*" God's present in us.

When we become followers of Jesus, his Spirit comes to live inside us. We're now containers of God. God is present in us. So when we come into a situation where there's a hurting person, we don't just bring ourselves, we bring God. We, ourselves, may not have much great to offer. But when we've got God, God uses our arms, our hands, our tears to connect with a person and bring hope and healing.

Maybe you're not as connected to God as you want to be; as you need to be. This, then, would be a time of surrender for you - a time to say "Jesus, I don't want to be like that guy who got to the end of his life and was a fool. I want to be someone who lives every moment of my life for you."

This is an opportunity. We've said that this is a opportunity for adventure, an opportunity for the miraculous, an opportunity for peace, an opportunity for ministry, an opportunity for intimacy with God; to be closer to God, an opportunity to change the world. When you say Yes to God it frees God to actually begin to do incredible things that change you and change everything.

But it's also a call to a battle. God calls us to be those who will resist evil; who will be on the front lines in the greatest mission ever planned - the mission to free the world from the powers of darkness and bring light.

It's dangerous to say yes to God - very dangerous. In fact, I can only think of two things that are more dangerous: saying no to God and saying yes without really meaning it.

So the question is will you say Yes to God? Will you take advantage of this opportunity? If so, the world is waiting. Let's pray.