

Stories of Faith: Lack of Faith

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – July 27 2025

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Hosea 14:4-9; James 1:2-8; Mark 9:17-27 CEB

Reflection: Psalm 138

Call to Worship: We have sinned just like our ancestors. We've done what is wrong. We've acted wickedly. Our ancestors in Egypt didn't understand your wondrous works. They didn't remember how much faithful love you have. But God remembered his covenant because of how much faithful love he has and showed them compassion. Lord our God, save us! Gather us back together so we can give thanks to your holy name and rejoice in your praise! (Psalm 106)

Prayer: We trust, O Lord, that you are with us. By faith we believe that you are present in our lives. We know that you have not abandoned us to our own thoughts and ways, but that you guide us in the path you have set for your people. You have revealed to us by faith all that we need to have eternal life. You have given us the strength we need to trust in what we cannot see and to believe in that which we know in our hearts. We pray you will continue to guide us and lead us in worship this day. May we sing your praises and glorify your name. Help us to share the stories of faith that we have heard and to be bold in sharing our own faith story. Help us to continue to work together in your name and to love one another in your presence. And may we always remember the salvation we find with Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 138

¹ I give thanks to you with all my heart, Lord. I sing your praise before all other gods. ² I bow toward your holy temple and thank your name for your loyal love and faithfulness because you have made your name and word greater than everything else. ³ On the day I cried out, you answered me. You encouraged me with inner strength. ⁴ Let all the earth's rulers give thanks to you, Lord, when they hear what you say. ⁵ Let them sing about the Lord's ways because the Lord's glory is so great! ⁶ Even though the Lord is high, he can still see the lowly, but God keeps his distance from the arrogant. ⁷ Whenever I am in deep trouble, you make me live again; you send your power against my enemies' wrath; you save me with your strong hand. ⁸ The Lord will do all this for my sake. Your faithful love lasts forever, Lord! Don't let go of what your hands have made. (Psalm 138 CEB)*

We read the words of Psalm 138, and we hear of God's salvation. That God is faithful and just and will help his people when they reach out. That God is always just a prayer away, even when we have doubts. Do you remember to turn to God when you begin to doubt? Do you ask him to strengthen your faith? Do you lift up others that their faith can be strengthened in their time of need? Who can you lift up in prayer this week? Who can you share your faith story with? What are some ways that you can share faithfulness with the people around you in the week to come?

Prayer: O God, we come together that we may seek your presence in this place. We come to you in prayer, for we know that you are always listening. We beseech you to hear the troubles that weigh deeply on our hearts. That you listen to the struggles we face alone and that we face together. That we lift up our personal triumphs to give thanks, and we celebrate the joys we have together. We bring all things before you Lord, knowing that you are always more ready to hear than we are to speak. We remember by faith that you are always there for us. May you bless us in both our laughter and our tears. Guide us in our mourning and our celebrations. And through it all, help us by your love and your grace. May you lead us by faith as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading is from Hosea chapter 14, verses 4 through 9.

⁴ I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. ⁵ I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like the lily; he will cast out his roots like the forests of Lebanon. ⁶ His branches will spread out; his beauty will be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like that of Lebanon. ⁷ They will again live beneath my shadow, they will flourish like a garden; they will blossom like the vine, their fragrance will be like the wine of Lebanon. ⁸ Ephraim, what do idols have to do with me? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like a green cypress tree; your fruit comes from me. ⁹ Whoever is wise understands these things. Whoever observes carefully knows them. Truly, the Lord's ways are right, and the righteous will walk in them, but evildoers will stumble in them. (Hosea 14:4-9 CEB+)

Our next reading is from James chapter 1, verses 2 through 8.

² My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. ³ After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing. ⁵ But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask. ⁶ Whoever asks shouldn't hesitate. They should ask in faith, without doubting. Whoever doubts is like the surf of the sea, tossed and turned by the wind. ⁷ People like that should never imagine that they will receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ They are double-minded, unstable in all their ways. (James 1:2-8 CEB+)

Our final reading is from Mark chapter 9, verses 17 through 27.

¹⁷ Someone from the crowd responded, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, since he has a spirit that doesn't allow him to speak. ¹⁸ Wherever it overpowers him, it throws him into a fit. He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and stiffens up. So I spoke to your disciples to see if they could throw it out, but they couldn't." ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "You faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me." ²⁰ They brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a fit. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked his father, "How

long has this been going on?" He said, "Since he was a child. ²² It has often thrown him into a fire or into water trying to kill him. If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!" ²³ Jesus said to him, "'If you can do anything'? All things are possible for the one who has faith." ²⁴ At that the boy's father cried out, "I have faith; help my lack of faith!" ²⁵ Noticing that the crowd had surged together, Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit, "Mute and deaf spirit, I command you to come out of him and never enter him again." ²⁶ After screaming and shaking the boy horribly, the spirit came out. The boy seemed to be dead; in fact, several people said that he had died. ²⁷ But Jesus took his hand, lifted him up, and he arose. (Mark 9:17-27 CEB+)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week marks the end of our "Stories of Faith" series, and we end by addressing a lack of faith. Today we look at how we handle when our faith has grown weak. It's a good question because we can struggle. When life comes at us, and it comes at us fast, sometimes our faith can weaken without even realizing it. Sometimes there's just too much to think about, and it makes it hard for us to keep moving forward. And so, I thought it was appropriate to look at how we handle a lack of faith. The example we are given in Mark's gospel is not one of someone whose faith has grown so weak that they don't know what to do at all. We get an example of how to keep moving forward and overcoming what may be a weak faith.

When we look at the account from Mark, we hear that somebody is struggling with a spirit that keeps them from doing anything, and the disciples couldn't handle it. When the disciples couldn't handle it, Jesus notes that he wonders how long he's going to have to deal with this faithless generation. We get the setup that Jesus feels very much that this is a matter of faith. Now, one of the things that I note here is that this interaction, Jesus questions not only the faith of his own disciples and their ability to throw out the spirit, but the faith of the father that brings his child to Jesus to have the spirit cast out. Jesus is questioning the faith of everyone. This ties into how we talked about how we come to believe and how we trust. Jesus isn't seeing that even his closest followers are able to trust by faith. This also ties into last week with the power of faith, because the man asks for help. But when he asks for help, he says, "If you can do anything, help us!" Jesus hears this and questions him about it. Jesus notes that "All things are possible for the one who has faith." Jesus is pointing out that the father doesn't have enough faith to believe without question that Jesus is capable. I think it's that the failure of the disciples has made this man question if Jesus himself will be able to do it. Jesus catches on to this and points out that he has said if. Jesus is pointing out that he doesn't seem to have faith that his son can be healed. The response is a rather interesting way to deal with this problem. He cries out that he has faith but then asks for help for his lack of faith. It is then that Jesus casts the spirit out and the boy is healed.

Now, one of the things I wanted to note on this is he feels he has faith, but when he realizes maybe it's not enough that he asks for help with that lack of faith. I found it interesting because it means that he's saying that maybe he thought he had faith, but if he doesn't, he would like to be strengthened to truly have faith. And he places himself in Jesus' hands. I think this declaration is one of the best ways that we could handle a lack of faith, because it means that we acknowledge that even if we thought we were strong, that we may be weak, and that we ask for help in our weakness. And for me, it's one of the best examples we have of just putting ourselves out there with not knowing. That we can admit that maybe our faith isn't

enough, and we ask for help. It is this idea that we don't always know if we are doing exactly what we should be doing. We are not always certain that we have gotten things right. And so, it helps that we keep this in mind that we can still ask for help, and that it can inspire us to have enough faith to understand that we lack faith.

We hear this in Hosea as well, in the way that God can heal our lack of faith, and that God does it through love. Because God's love helps to heal us, and helps to heal our lack of faith. Because when things have gotten difficult and things are hard, it often is not that we choose to doubt, it's that we are so worn out that our faith suffers. That God's love can heal us and help us to understand that there is more we can do, and that our faith can be healed. That when we walk with God, God will always guide us to where we need us to be. When we walk with God, we find healing and we find hope, and our faith is strengthened. I think it's important that we recognize that faith is healed through love, because too often, people think that scaring somebody into doing the right thing is going to cause genuine faith. That shaming somebody will cause them to have genuine faith. That ridiculing someone will cause them to have genuine faith. And I've never seen that happen. But I have seen people come to faith through love, and that's the image that we are given in Hosea: a loving God that heals our faithfulness, who gives us the wisdom we need to be able to understand what we are called to do.

We hear this again in James, that we'll have trials and tests, and things will be difficult at times. Life will not always be easy. Just as we heard about running the race with endurance, that the endurance that we go through will complete the work of faith, so that we'll lack nothing. That if we need wisdom, God will provide us with wisdom. All we have to do is ask. That when we ask, we need to ask with faith. And when James talks about having doubt here, I don't see this personally as the natural doubts that come from struggles. What I see is when we choose to doubt. What I mean by that is, when we choose to see things in a negative way. I see this as the real doubt that we suffer, that makes us double-minded, because it's the type of doubt that causes us to not trust our neighbor. Not that they've given us a cause to not trust them, but because we have chosen to default to doubt instead of defaulting to trust in love, because we do not believe that faith is worth having. In that sense, our faith is what helps us to be able to trust each other and to be able to give each other a chance in Christ. That if I cannot have faith that my neighbor can be good, it's going to make it very hard for me to love my neighbor. If I choose to have that doubt, I am choosing to avoid being able to live at peace with my neighbor. I am choosing to not want the wisdom that God will provide, because it means we're actively choosing to doubt everything that people do. That we are unwilling to see the good in the world. When we make that choice, our doubts do cause problems, because it means that we do not start from love, we start from suspicion. And if we start from suspicion, it's very hard to learn to love and it's going to cause us to have a lack of faith, both in God and in our brothers and sisters in Christ. All because we choose the path of doubt.

Now, does this mean that all doubts are bad? Doubt is a normal thing. Doubt is something that comes to everyone. Sometimes we think that simply having doubts places us in a position where we have done something wrong. The difference that I would give us here is that when we choose to doubt, that is different than natural doubts arising. Choosing to doubt means believing that things always start bad, and that things are not naturally good, and that love is not the best way forward. Natural doubt is what happens when we have chosen love and things are still difficult, when we feel we have done everything we can and things are still

hard. And doubt is part of faith, because often it is overcoming doubts that helps to inspire our faith to be that much more. It's one of the reasons that I always say that Christianity is not meant for an individual but for a community. Because we will say things like "God will never give us more than we can handle." Which I think is true, but only if we accept that sometimes the answer is that we can only face it with the faith and strength of the community. Because sometimes things are too much for one person. Sometimes things are too difficult for just one person. But Christ never tells us that we are alone. When we think we have to take things on by ourselves, we are the ones sowing the seeds of doubt because we refused the wisdom to let others help us by faith. Even when our faith wavers, we have the faith of the community to strengthen us. They are the ones that help us to overcome our doubts. They are the answer to that prayer we pray to have God help us in our lack of faith.

Because God knows there will be doubts and fears. God knows there will be worries. Because things don't always go how we want. Because we are not perfect. We do not always treat each other as well as we should. We do not always do the right thing. We do not always understand what it was we were supposed to do when we make mistakes. But when we face them together, it helps us to have a stronger faith. Because when we face it together, we work to overcome those doubts with love, with grace, with compassion, and with honesty. In this last message in our "Stories of Faith" series, I want to leave you with this thought: When we share our stories of faith, we strengthen each other. Because we all have stories of how things were hard, and how God helped us to overcome. It could be we are writing that story right now. It could be that you yourself are facing a hardship that you are struggling with. And I want you to remember the people in this place, the people of Christ, are there for you, and they are with you. Their faith is your faith. Because as we share in life together in Christ, we share in faith together in Christ, and we may strengthen each other and build each other up in love. Because that is the hope that I have in my risen Savior. That he will always help us to be more, to do more, and to have the faith we need to carry us through. And that faith is always strengthened when we share our story of faith, and when we share it in love through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Stories of Faith

This series is a 4-week series for the month of July and in it we will be looking at different stories of faith. Each week we will cover one of the four gospels with a story about faith. We will hear about belief, trust, the strength of faith, and how we overcome a lack of faith. These lessons will help prepare us for how we live out our own faith journey in Christ. The gospels can teach us a lot about what it means to live a life of faith.

7/6: To Believe

7/13: Trusting

7/20: Power of Faith

7/27: Lack of Faith

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Toledo UMC

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Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

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