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PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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GOD HAS FAITH IN YOU

Luke 22.32

Have you ever hosted a party where everything went wrong? A birthday party where the guest of honor took advantage of the occasion to feel sorry for himself-- another year, another foot in the grave? A wedding reception where people drank too much? A wake where people argued over the inheritance: A family Christmas celebration that began with a candlelight service but almost ended in a brawl as tender emotions took off in unexpected directions?

Such happenings do occur. They are very disheartening, very disillusioning. For we plan our celebrations out of love and joy and faith, and to have them break down this way is one of life's most crushing experiences. Events that are meant to affirm the best in people have a way sometimes of bringing out the worst.

So Jesus discovered at that special passover celebration we call the Last Supper. Oh, I know that our familiar image of that event is one of unbroken reverence and harmony. These thirteen devoted men, sitting together around a table. But think, for a minute, of what happened there. There is Judas sneaking away to set up his arrangements for leading Jesus into ambush. There is the dispute among the other disciples as to which of them is the greatest. Haven't they learned anything at all over the last couple of years? Most irritating of all, perhaps, is Peter's brash boasting about his loyalty and devotion. This Passover celebration began in the somber knowledge that the world outside was growing hostile to Jesus and his ministry. The end was drawing near. Even so, this dark knowledge might be borne so long as the people here on the inside were committed and loving and faithful.

But that wasn't the way the party turned out. It broke down into conspiracy, petty squabbling and egotistical posturing. How could Jesus bear that?

His basic realism helped. It was realism nurtured by that body of literature that never fails to call a spade a spade when it speaks of human nature. It was the realism of the Old Testament. It wasn't as if Jesus weren't prepared. Jesus knew about Simon, that old friend of his whom he nicknamed "Rocky." No doubt there was a deliberate touch of irony in the name. Jesus knew that when the terror struck, this "Rocky," this Peter, would grow frightened and confused. He sobers Peter up out of his heady boastfulness by a blunt prediction of how Peter will behave.

But there was something else that helped Jesus bear the situation too. We glimpse at something in this remarkable statement--

Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.

Do you perceive the astonishing assumption there? "And when you have turned again." There is the assumption that this man who is about to let Jesus down will become the chief support of the other disciples. Jesus continues to believe in this man's possibilities. There is a tremendous venture of faith here which through prayer makes alliance with God to rekindle Peter's own faith in himself and in his lord.

It is this act of faith that opens up the theme of my sermon today. It is a theme set forth in a title that may strike you as a strange reversal of words: God has faith in you. This reversal of words is not just a trick to catch your eye. It expresses what I feel is a valid way of looking at the relationship between God and people in the light of the Bible. My message is simply this: Our faith in God, our faith in ourselves, our faith that life can have value and meaning rests ulti

mately on a vote of confidence that becomes from beyond ourselves, an act of faith that is divine.

Let me explain what I mean by drawing an analogy from the way love works. We have all been taught that people need to receive love before they can give love. If we didn't learn that from psychology I, we might have learned it from Mother Goose.

What makes the lamb love Mary so?
the eager children cried.

Why Mary loves the lamb, you know
the teacher did reply.

And if we've gorgotten our Mother Goose, we may remember our New Testament

"We love because He first loved us."

In order to love people need to be loved. It is love that generates love. Now I am suggesting that the same principle applies to faith. It is faith that generates faith. It is the confidence that other people have in us that renews our self-confidence. It is the belief that other people show in us that enables us to believe in ourselves and in what we are doing.

Do you know what the first thing I do is when I march up here on Sunday morning? I look out to see where Jana is. If I can't find her right away, if she is sitting in some unaccustomed place, I get disoriented. If I don't find her by the time I come to the sermon, that sermon is bound to be a total loss. That is not to say that I haven't preached some halfway decent sermons when Jana wasn't around at all. But that is due to the fact that I have built up some capital of faith from the times she was there.

We draw on the faith of others. Husbands and wives. Friends and acquaintances. Parents and children. Generation and generation.

A few years ago I preached a college baccalaureate more or less on this same theme. I pointed out to those young people that they owed much to the faith of others--their parents, their teachers, the people who gave the college money believing that something worthwhile might be accomplished by helping people like them get an education.

These graduating students were in the habit of accepting ventures of faith from people older than themselves. But now I told them they would be going into situations where they would have opportunities to make ventures of faith in people older than themselves. I told them the story of Hemmingway's The Old Man and the Sea. The venerable Cuban fisherman goes out alone to catch the largest marlin ever seen in those parts only to have the fish eaten by sharks. The next morning he awakens in his hut, his hands bleeding, his body wracked by the ordeal. And there is the boy who used to be his helper. Recently the boy's parents have made him work in the boat of a more successful fisherman. But the boy looks after the old man. There is faith between them. From the time the boy was five, the old man trusted the boy to carry his gear.

The boy says: "How we fish together again."

"No," says the old man. "I am not lucky. I am not lucky anymore."

"The hell with luck," the boy tells him. "I'll bring the luck with me."

"What will your family say?"

"I do not care. I caught two yesterday. But we fish together now. For I still have much to learn."

And then the old man who has not caught anything for forty days, who is broken by his ordeal with the sharks, says to the boy:

"We must get a good killing lance."

They begin to make plans together.

There are many great fish in the sea that may be caught by old men and boys who believe in each other.

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Faith generates faith. This fundamental principle underlies the great themes of the Bible. One of those themes is that of creation. God engages in the stupendous venture of calling a world into being. That venture is an act of faith. There is risk in it as well as commitment.

A second great biblical theme is that of redemption. God's venture runs into difficulties. One part of the experiment, the human part, gets into trouble. God is disappointed. That disappointment is so horrendous that throughout the Old Testament we are kept in suspense as to whether Yahweh will not decide to let the whole thing go down the drain. But again and again, from the story of Adam and Eve, to the story of Noah, to the agonized outcry of Hosea, to the exalted poems of the prophet we know as second Isaiah, the word comes through that God will not give up. God's faith in humanity outruns every expression of human unfaithfulness. And in the story of Jesus that message comes through to us more powerfully than ever.

I have been speaking in general terms. But the Bible itself always comes down to particulars. It comes down to you and me. Our own creation is an act of divine faith, and if you think about that for awhile it can change your whole perspective on life. And we, too, are blessed by acts of redemption so that again and again we can say, "There but for the faith of God, go I."

But how does God bring this act of faith, this vote of confidence, home to us? Sometimes, I think, God does it by giving us something to do.

I have the impression that my life at home is spent under constant surveillance. For every time I go out into my yard, a little girl appears. This little girl is especially interested in my garden. Whether I am planting, or hoeing, or pulling weeds, or gathering my harvest, she will suddenly appear and ask, "Can I help?"

My reaction at times has been to tell her that I am doing something that only one person can do. For she may put the seeds in the wrong place, or pull out the plants, or pick things that aren't ripe. She cannot even get in my garden unless I lift her over the fence put up to keep out the rabbits.

But then I think it is important that she be given an opportunity to help. I must trust her a little for little girls are more important than turnips and tomatoes.

In John's account of the resurrection we find the risen Christ approaching Peter and speaking to him directly for the first time since that last supper. Jesus says nothing about what has happened in between, nothing about the living and dissembling among the serving girls in the courtyard. Jesus simply asks Peter, "Do you love me?" And when Peter answers, "You know that I do," Jesus tells him,-- "Feed my sheep." Peter is given a chance to help, you see. And there was Christ's act of faith again.

God gives us something to do. One of the most remarkable Christians of modern times was Toyohiko Kagawa of Japan. When he became a Christian as a young man, Kagawa was disowned by his family. He went to live in one of his country's worst slums to see what he could do for the people there. Then he became ill and lost his eyesight. His physician declared that his case was hopeless.

Many years later while addressing an audience in America, Kagawa described what happened while he lay there in the dark feeling sorry for himself.

Then I had a revelation. It is not I that believe in God; it is God that believes in me! I was locked in the darkness of God's womb waiting for God to bring me to rebirth, to issue me forth in purity. For God had some great expectation regarding me...in that moment, I knew it was time for me to get up and return to work.

Kagawa never regained his eyesight completely. Physical handicaps remained. But so did the massive misery of that slum where he was sent to help. Once he realized that his usefulness depended not so much on the power of his own faith as on the power of God's faith, Kagawa got up out of his situation of collapse. He went on to write books, establish credit unions, organize farm cooperatives and to become

an inspiration to people the world over.

"For God had some great expectation regarding me." God has some expectation regarding every person. That expectation may not lead to fame and glory. But it is there. And once we know that it's there, it can make a tremendous difference.

Another way that God's faith may generate our faith is through a shrewd application of the needle.

The old timers will tell you that Ty Cobb was the greatest hitter of them all. And Connie Mack of the Philadelphia Athletics was one of the cleverest managers. Toward the end of his career, Ty Cobb played for Connie Mack. He fell into a deep batting slump. One day as his turn at bat arrived, he stood up and started for the plate. But Mr. Mack--it was always Mr. Mack in a dark blue suit and a starched white shirt--Mr. Mack called after him--

"Just a minute Ty, I was wondering if a pinch hitter..."

"No one ever hits for Cobb," growled the Georgia Peach. He strode to the plate and smacked a double. And that was just how Connie Mack planned it.

Perhaps God plans it that way sometimes, too. God's faith in us takes a reverse twist and goads us into fulfilling our capacities. Instead of patting Jeremiah on the head in his moment of frustration, Yahweh asks him--

If you have run with men and they have worn you out, how do you expect to keep up with horses?

Contrary to what some of us might expect, those people who have left us the most inspired records of the life of the spirit--those whom we call the Christian mystics--were not people who spent all their lives holed up in solitary hermitage. Typically they were leading organization men and women. One of these was Teresa of Avila who reformed the Carmelite order and who organized convents all over Spain. She met with much opposition from church officials and endured many hardships in her travels. Once her carriage fell over and she was thrown into a stream. As she waded toward the bank, she cried out,

"Lord, amid so many ills, this comes on top of all the rest!"

Then, according to St. Teresa, the Lord answered her--

"That is how I treat my friends."

"Ah, my God," said this woman of great faith, "That's why you have so few of them."

But she continued with her journey.

Sometimes the faith of God tests our mettle, drives us to the edge, needles us into going forward out of sheer annoyance. But it is still God's faith at work. And in moments of deep prayer we discern the challenge that has been offered us.

Yet there are times when I think God adopts milder measures. The task becomes too much for us. It seems that we have lost faith in ourselves, in God, in other people, in the future, in everything. Then what we need is the simple assurance that God's faith is still behind us, accepting us as we are.

We may imagine a moment in Peter's life that never was recorded. It was a moment after a cock crowed. In that grey dawn a word came to Peter as surely as a word came to Jeremiah and St. Teresa-- "Simon, Simon, I still believe in you."

God has faith in you. That is a turned-around way of putting things. But I think there's truth in it. I don't think it's a complete heresy. Indeed, I think that if you discovered that truth you would discover the deepest secret of the universe. You would discover that behind your little faith there is a far greater faith that never gives up, that brings opportunity out of defeat and life out of death.

Simon...I have prayed that your faith may not fail...and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.

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