

Amazing Faith-TOSC Devotional January 2014

Matthew 4:19

Have you ever sung the song amazing grace and substituted the word “faith” for “grace”? We might not be inclined to take such a liberty, especially if we understand faith to be descriptive of the human response to Gods great love. But what if faith is more similar to love in the sense of being one of the three motivating powers like 1 Corinthians 13 indicates (1 Corinthians 13:13). What if the source of all faith is in the heart of God? What if our faith in God is simply a poor fragmented response of His undying faithfulness to us?

And what if every text in the Bible is a part of a divine revelation, to one degree or another, of Gods faithfulness to us. Look, for example, at the call of Jesus to His first disciples:

“Then He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”
Matthew 4:19

There’s a whole lot of New Covenant gospel in this verse. New Covenant Gospel is all about Gods faithfulness to us rather than our faithfulness to Him. We have nothing to offer God. The human agent is bankrupt of any goodness. If you doubt that to any degree just take a look at Christ’s first disciples. For much of the first years of their training for the ministry in Messiah University they were more like fighting fishermen than fishers of men. Mark chapter 9 records one of many verses detailing their folly:

33* Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, “What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?”
34 But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. Mark 9:33, 34

When we consider the short 3.5 years of their education to be fishers of men (just short of a bachelors degree in religion today), we are tempted to wonder why Jesus chose these men? While the greatest teacher that ever trod sandals was among them, they were constantly squabbling about who was going to be counted the greatest.

Yes the disciples were in Messiah University learning to be fishers of men, but too often they were sitting in the back of the class working on their Facebook account or twitter following. They wanted the degree

because it would give them a good position in the kingdom/church of God.

So often, when they came to class they sat at the back, far enough away from Christ that He could not discover their worldly expectations, so they hoped. When He asked about the deep theological discussions they were having among themselves... they kept silent. He who reads the thoughts of all men knew all too well the battles with self that they were losing day by day. Your Savior and mine was fighting those very same battles and always winning in God's way.

Their distance from Christ was seen in their ministry for Christ. Fishers of men was often the last thing on their minds.

Just outside a Samaritan village fishing for souls was replaced with calling fire down on those who weren't accommodating to their plans - Luke 9:54

On another occasion they tried to prevent others from working for Christ because they weren't part of their group- Luke 9:50

There were even moments when they "acted out" toward Christ, making it sound like He, the Word of God made flesh, didn't know what He was talking about- John 16:18

At their lowest moments they even forbid the children to come to Jesus. There is hardly a religious gage more accurate than how we treat children—(except, perhaps, how we treats cats) Luke 18:16, Matthew 18

So what does this look like today—this "who is the greatest" antagonism?

Is it based on education, influence, position, or authority? Is being the greatest how many followers we have on Twitter? How many books we have written or have in our library or how many letters are behind our names? Perhaps its based on how many countries we preached in, or our position in the church, the authority we hold, the influence we exert.

Jesus once indicated who the greatest really was and His assessment was based on none of this. He pointed to the life of John the Baptist.

Luke 7:28 “For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

Jesus also said:

Luke 9:48 ...he who is least among you all will be great.”

How could the disciples contend for the greatest position in the very presence of Christ? Were they unaware? Did they really think that their contentions for the greatest position would escape His notice if they followed Him at a distance? Didn't they realize that their "who is the greatest" spirit was placing distance between them and their Savior?

Of course none of us today is contending for the greatest position as followers of Christ. At least I'm not. It's never bothered me that I can't draw a crowd like Mark Finley or preach like Dwight Nelson. I've never cared that after 30 years of ministry in any every major continent of the world I can't even baptize people because I'm not an ordained pastor. I never wanted more letters behind my name or secretly coveted a position of authority so I could dictate the truth, my truth, to every person who disagreed with me theologically. And I've certainly never felt spiritually superior to anyone in the church, especially not women.

This spiritual blindness to my own fallen nature makes it difficult for me to understand how the disciples could be contending for the greatest position, but it does make it easy for me to relate to the experience of Peter. One of the Peter's most difficult experiences came just before the crucifixion of Christ. Jesus was directing attention to Calvary, as He did often. Yet even Christ's cross-focused teaching led the disciples to their self-focused agenda. Lets' pick up the story as Luke tells it in chapter 22:

21 “But behold, the hand of My betrayer is with Me on the table. 22*
“And truly the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!” 23 Then they began to question among themselves, which of them it was who would do this thing. 24*
Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. Luke 22:21-24

Can you imagine contending about being the greatest when Christ points us to the cross? Welcome to the reality of fallen humanity! It is in this context that we discover one of the most beautiful pictures of the faith of Jesus ever given to man. Matthew rounds out the story for us in Chapter 26:

31* Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' 32* "But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." 33* Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." 34* Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." 35* Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And [not to be outdone by impetuous Peter] so said all the disciples" (Matthew 26:31-33)

This is an amazing revelation of human nature. The disciples of Christ, 3.5 years into the best school of theology available on planet earth, those who ought to be and do better are so full of themselves that they argue with the Word Himself. And how does Christ, the greatest teacher that ever trod sandals, handle the situation?

Hurry back with me to verse 32. Settle in with me on this verse. Don't leave it. Don't dare move from it. Hold this verse as your only hope. Know that outside of inspiration, there are no words in the language of any culture to adequately describe the pure gospel message that Christ is communicating here.

32* "But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee."

There is hardly a more sublime utterance of faith in all of Scripture. The greatest pain that Jesus will experience in ministry will be at the hands of His disciples and Peter in particular-primarily because Jesus has drawn close to them. It is as we connect closely with people that we become more vulnerable to be hurt by those people. As CS Lewis wrote: "to love at all is to be vulnerable." This is why we often hold back a little or a lot of our hearts from people, but Jesus did not do this. He was sold out for us. Someone recently sent me a tweet that read:

“God loves you more in a moment than anyone could in a lifetime”

The truth of this lies in the reality that in every moment of God’s love He is infinitely sold out for all humanity.

This love reveals the faithfulness of God:

32* “But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.”

Here is an inspired commentary of this powerful passage from the pen of Ellen White:

“Jesus looks with compassion on His disciples. He cannot save them from the trial, but He does not leave them comfortless. He assures them that He is to break the fetters of the tomb, and that His love for them WILL NOT FAIL. "After I am risen again," He says, "I will go before you into Galilee." Matthew 26:32. Before the denial, they have the assurance of forgiveness. After His death and resurrection, they knew that they were forgiven, and were dear to the heart of Christ. (DA 674).

In modern terminology:

When I was at war with God He accepted to die for me. And now that I am reconciled with Him, tell me why He would abandon me?

This assurance of God’s forgiveness rings true to the very close of time for all who will believe it. Faith in it is the very life-blood of the church. It comes to us, as it came to the first disciples and Peter, through the intercessory prayers of Christ. Luke 22 shows us what that looks like:

31* And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. 32* “But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.”

Imagine Christ in heaven right now at the right hand of God praying for you as He did for Peter. Picture Him covering your sin-polluted heart with His righteousness, the perfect life of His obedience and with His cruel death for your sins. Then look into His eyes as He shares with you this one request:

Pastors, Administrators, presidents, professors, laymen, brothers and sisters: “strengthen your brethren.”

This is the one desire that Christ has for His people everywhere. It is often repeated but rarely so simply as by John.

35* “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35

This is the final test: Will we love one another in spite of the faults we cannot help but seeing. Will we gather warmth from the coldness of others (5T 81)? Will we feed and uplift instead of criticizing and pulling down? Will we preach the gospel as a witness when the love of the many grows cold Matthew 24:14.

This was the test for Peter. Yes Jesus had assured Peter and the rest of His fighting fishermen of His unconditional love. He had assured them of His forgiveness yet Christ recognized the need to test the sincerely of Peters experience and disclose to Peter the utter bankrupt nature of the human heart. We pick up the story in John 21:

15* ¶ So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love [agape] Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love [phileo] You.” He said to him, “Feed My lambs.”

16* He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love [agape] Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love [phileo] You.” He said to him, “Tend My sheep.”

17* He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love [phileo] Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love [phileo] Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love [phileo] You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep.” John 21:15-17

Jesus was teaching Peter and us at least two important truths here.

One, the human heart is bankrupt of love. We naturally have neither Agape or Phileo love.

Two, Agape love, divine love, is the basis of all other love. To admit we are without Agape is to recognize that our human hearts are naturally empty of the source of love, for out of Agape springs all true love.

Every time Jesus asks Peter these testing questions about Peter's love He also points him in the direction of ministry. Nurture, tend, care, feed, provide for my sheep.

1) Rev. 21:9, 21:9, 14, 27-lambs-church

2) John 10:16-sheep-other folds

3) Isa. 53:6-sheep-world

The passages in John 21 close with this amazing confirmation of the utter depravity of our fallen condition. Christ wraps up His personal one-on-one instruction to Peter by saying:

18* "Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." 19* This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me."

Pause here for a moment: Here is a powerful lesson for us and Peter. And it is insightful in two ways. Jesus chose His disciples (and us) with the call to follow Him. In the end Jesus gives them the same message, follow Me. This then is the beginning and the end all of our duty-the Alpha and Omega is to follow Jesus. The bottom line if you will. The book of Revelation pictures those who do just that, "follow the Lamb, wherever He goes." Rev 14:4

To do that we have this natural tendency of human nature to overcome a tendency so ingrained in fallen human nature that only the unfailing faithfulness of Jesus can vanquish it at last. Peter illustrates it for us once again:

20* ¶ Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following... 21* Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?" 22* Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me." 23* Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?" John 21:18-23.

I like the way Jesus handles this scenario. Basically, Jesus says to Peter, your responsibility is to follow me not tinker in the lives of others. Of course you know how difficult a work we make it to follow Christ.

It's been 2,000 years since Jesus made that first call to those fishermen by the sea of Galilee. Today that call echoes down the corridors of time. And those who have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches understand that this is a New Covenant call. Not to be fishers of men, that's a bonus! The call is to follow Jesus. To follow the Lamb wherever He goes, to follow Him closely, daily allowing the Spirit to "narrow the gap" between us and Christ. This is our destiny, the final part of the 144,000; the people who round out the redeemed of all ages; who deliver the everlasting gospel to all-the world when love waxes cold (Revelation 14:4). It is the destiny of this church and every member of it. It is the destiny of all people once Jesus is seen as Savior.

We have been challenged this week, intellectually, physically, physiologically, emotionally, spiritually. To one degree or another we have all fallen short of the glory of God. We have failed Jesus, but Jesus never fails us.

Luke 22:32 "I have prayed for you that your faith fail not fail"—are the words of our suffering Savior echoing down the corridors of time to this very room, this upper room of 2014.

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God looks at us today this group of Tosc members divided opinionated yet each wanting to be like Christ, to love mercy, and do justly, and walk humbly with our Lord; God points to us and says to the un-fallen universe-here they are; these are the ones that I've been telling you about for centuries the ones that My prophecies have predicted the guileless ones who will follow the Lamb wherever He goes. This is the faith of Jesus-believe it, hold to it, keep it because it is the only faith that will keep you. Amen.