

Four Pillars of Christian Faith, Part 2 “Pistis: Relationship with God”
Matthew 6.5–15 and 14.22–33
The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 4 July 2004

Last week, I started a sermon series on what I imagine as the four pillars of Christian faith. As I said last week, these are not the *only* four pillars, they are my own construction, and therefore not universal. You might think about what pillars *you’d* include in your own listing. They are descriptive, rather than proscriptive. Last week I spoke about *koinonía* or community, and this week I am turning to the word *pistis*, which in the Greek of the New Testament is often translated as “faith.”

Yet, I hesitate to call the second pillar “faith,” because we have so many preconceived and sometimes distorted images of what faith is. As I suggested in a sermon a few months back, faith is not the same as belief.

Back around the time I was born, John A.T. Robinson, a bishop of the Church of England, was stirring the theological pot in an era when neo-orthodoxy was the order of the day. He once quipped that faith is not “swallowing nineteen unbelievable things before breakfast.” So, that’s the negative view: what faith is *not*. He also wrote a famously controversial book, called *Honest to God*, in which he defines it positively. Faith “in God,” he writes, “is the trust, the well nigh incredible trust, that to give ourselves to the uttermost in love is not to be confounded, but to be ‘accepted,’ that Love is the ground of our being, to which we ultimately ‘come home.’”¹ So, this notion of “incredible trust” is one way to talk about active faith.

Trust, for most of us, is difficult. Do we trust ourselves wholly to God? I don’t know anyone who has this wired. We in the United Church tend to be a very heady, apparently self-sufficient lot, and the idea of surrendering ourselves completely to God probably sounds vaguely Catholic and certainly naïve to most of us. Yet, putting our trust completely in God is what faith entails.

Imagine yourself as Peter out in the boat, and Jesus commands you to walk out onto the water. You trust, so you get out of the boat and take a few steps out onto the water. You can feel the water splashing against the soles of your feet and you think that everything is okay. And then the wind starts to howl, and you begin to lose it. “He became frightened,” says the gospel writer, “and began to sink, he cried out ‘Lord, save me!’” And Jesus responds with the famous line, “O, ye of little faith.” (A form of the *pistis* is used in the original Greek in that verse.)

Don’t you think Jesus is being a bit hard on Peter? How many of us would even have taken the first step out onto the water?

Let’s look at the dynamic going on in this vivid story. Faith is all about trusting Jesus, putting your life into Jesus’ hands. And when does Peter begin to sink? It’s the moment when his fear overcomes his trust. So, in this story, the opposite of faith is fear. One of the most common refrains in the Bible is “Be not afraid.” So, if it’s helpful to you to think about faith in terms of its opposite, consider how you feel when you sense fear and how you feel when that fear is dispelled.

Richard Rohr, a progressive Franciscan priest, writes that “Only when we rest in God can we find the safety, the spaciousness, and the scary freedom to be *who* we are, *all* that we are, [and] *more* than we are.”²

John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God*. (Louisville: WJK, 1963), p. 49.

² Richard Rohr. *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*. (NY: Crossroads, 1999), p. 102.

I wonder how many of us grew up thinking that “faith” means trust? That certainly isn’t the most common perception in our popular culture. When you say “faith” to many people, they define it as believing the unbelievable. That the Bible is inerrant. That Jesus was literally born of a virgin. That it only took God six days to create the universe. Well, if that’s what *faith* means, I wouldn’t include it as one of the pillars. It’s that breed of anti-intellectual Christianity that is driving thinking people away from the church.

It is absurd to think that we are all going to experience God in exactly the same way. When we say the words of a creed, as we did this morning, we bring to them our own life experience, our own theological perspectives, and our own experience of the holy. In the UCC, we use the creeds not in a proscriptive way, but in a manner that opens us to an understanding of others’ experience. Our relationship with God is an intimate, personal experience, not one that is mandated by doctrine, dogma, or creed.



Let me pose a question for you: would you trust someone with whom you had no relationship? Or to put it another way, if you went on a blind date with someone, would you be willing to trust that person with all your innermost thoughts, all the money in your checking account, and all your PIN numbers? If you have any boundaries and brains, of course you wouldn’t! So, how should we expect that any of us would be willing to trust God entirely until we’ve built a relationship with God? And the way we develop a relationship, with a new person in our lives or with God, is by spending time together, sharing our thoughts and who we are. It takes time to develop intimacy and trust in any relationship, and that’s true for our relationship with God. I’m not sure any of us would walk out on the water without sinking, just like Peter did.



We need to “practice the presence of God” in order to build relationship, and the clearest way to that is through prayer. If you’re a bit confused about prayer, you’re not alone. The earliest Christians were a bit muddled, as well, otherwise Jesus would not have to have offered them instruction: “do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do...pray in this way.” And Jesus offers the Lord’s Prayer as one example. It’s a prayer that involves affirmation of who God is, that we are in God’s realm, that petitions God for food and forgiveness and safety. It’s our model for intercessory prayer. It assumes relationship, and it *builds* relationship. You all know the prayer, we print it in our bulletin. If you wanted to start an intentional practice of prayer, you could try saying the Lord’s Prayer before you get out of bed in the morning.

Meister Eckhart, a 13th century mystic, said, “If the only prayer you say in your life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” Our expression of gratitude, though not a part of the Lord’s Prayer, is another way we build relationship. We often do this at home at the dinner table: we go around, and each say what we’re thankful for. (And we can always count on Christopher, our three-year-old, to say, “I’m thankful for playing pirates with Eli!”)

Richard Rohr claims that “Religion without personal prayer experience is basically useless and maybe even dangerous for the soul.”³ Spiritual exercises such as prayer strengthen our relationship with God, not unlike the way physical exercise strengthens our bodies’ muscles. I think Rohr is saying the same things Jesus did: don’t pray for public acclamation, don’t pray to put on a show, and don’t worry about flowery phrases. But *do pray!* Just experience it.

³ *ibid.*, p. 115

Thomas Keating, former abbot at Snowmass Monastery and the father of Centering Prayer, describes contemplative prayer as “a hot date with God,” which is an image I adore!

Prayer is one of the primary ways we reconnect with God. In fact our word *religion* comes from two Latin roots: *re* (again) and *ligio* (to connect...it's the same root for our word *ligament*). So, if religion is about reconnecting with God, prayer needs to occupy a central role in practicing our faith. “The things that help us get back to integrated knowing are both obvious, and not obvious at all,” says Rohr. “Silence is helpful, especially extended silence where we observe ourselves and can feel emotional changes, moment by moment.”⁴ If you're interested in contemplative prayer, I invite you to drop by on Thursday morning at 9:00, when we have a centering prayer group here at Plymouth. During the academic year, we also have a contemplative service in the style of Taizé on the first Sunday evening of each month.

Woody Allen once said that 90 percent of life is just showing up. And I think there is a lot of truth in that. That's certainly my experience with prayer. Just showing up and being present to God is 90 percent of prayer.

We had a really interesting deacons meeting last month, during which we discussed the meaning of prayer and how we at Plymouth should incorporate prayer into our committee meetings. It was a fabulous discussion, and I was really pleased by the spiritual maturity of our deacons. They decided to recommend to the church council that all meetings at Plymouth be conducted in a prayerful manner: not necessarily starting with a spoken prayer and ending with the Lord's Prayer, but to use every minute of our time together as a form of prayer by bringing our awareness to the idea that we are with God.

Too often, we have preconceived notions about what prayer should look like: folded hands, bowed head, saying “amen” at the end. But virtually any activity can be a form of prayer, if we do it with prayerful intention and if we bring our attention to God's presence. So, I'd counsel us to broaden the ways we define prayer.

Again, to quote Richard Rohr: “Prayer is not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts. It is, rather, a stance. It's a way of living *in* the Presence, living in *awareness* of the Presence and even *enjoying* the Presence [of God]. The full contemplative is not just aware of the Presence, but trusts, allows, and delights in it. All spiritual disciplines have one purpose: to get rid of illusions so we can be present.”⁵

Now, it's all well and good for me to stand in the pulpit and preach about prayer, but that in itself doesn't do anyone any real good. We've got to *experience* prayer, not just talk about it. And I'd like to invite you to make a “hot date with God” this week and spend some time working on your relationship. Whether it's by having 15 minutes of silence and imagining yourself enfolded by God's love, or whether it's preparing a meal in a prayerful frame of mind and heart, or whether it's imagining all the ways you can put your trust in God; just do it!

Amen.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 114

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 31.