**Abiding Faith**

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We are in the midst of a three-year cycle of themes in the Iowa Mission District:  Hope, Faith and Love.  These themes were derived from the Apostle Paul’s statement in his letter to the church at Corinth in which he said, “*So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*”  (1 Corinthians 13:13)  Last year our theme was Hope.  This year we will direct our attention to Faith.  We’re saving Love, the “greatest”, for last, but since Paul notes that these are the three things that “abide”, we must assume that all are essential in our relationship with the Lord and with one another.

Some might argue that “faith” is the greatest, or most essential, element in our life as God’s people.  Our Lord Jesus makes it clear that this is the one requirement in being a child of God.  In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*”  (John 3:16)  A little later in John’s Gospel, Jesus answers the question of “*What must we do, to be doing the works of God?*”  (John 6:28) with this answer:  *“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*”  (verse 29)  From these statements of Christ, we could easily conclude that faith is all we need.  However, it’s a bit like the old popular song, “Love and Marriage”—“Love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage….”  In one sense, you can have one without the other, but unless they are held together, there’s always a sense of something missing.  In the case of “faith, hope, and love”, the three are not entirely separate, and in the best case, they don’t just “go together”, they are intertwined, inseparably woven together.

To take Jesus’ teachings in the above quoted passages out of the context of His entire ministry is to distort the faith our Lord is calling us into.  One such distortion occurred among the Pharisees of Jesus’ time who were very meticulous about keeping the Law of God.  Many of them had taken obedience to the Law out of the context of concern for the neighbor and turned it into a works-oriented self-help program.  The motivation was guided by the question of “what must I do to get myself saved?”  They ignored the words of Micah—“*He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8)  To get the faith question right, we must look at what else our Lord had to say about being His followers.

With faith in Christ as the foundation of our lives with the Lord God, we hear Jesus’ words in answer to the question about the greatest commandment:  “*And one of [the Pharisees], a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him.  “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”  And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.  This is the great and first commandment.  And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.  On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets*.’”  (Matthew 22:35-40)  Here, Jesus shows us the “love connection”.  Everything we do as those who believe in Christ Jesus and follow His teachings is done out of love for God and love for our neighbor.

If we search Jesus’ teachings for the hope connection, we find it inseparably linked with faith.  He doesn’t single it out as Paul does, but we find specific mention of it throughout the Old Testament.  Psalm 33:20-22 offers us one example:

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*Our soul waits for the Lord;
   he is our help and shield.
Yea, our heart is glad in him,
   because we trust in his holy name.
Let thy steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,
   even as we hope in thee.*

Hope, in the Christian context, is based on trust, and this is closely related to faith and our expectation that God’s promises will be fulfilled.  Belief, as Jesus uses the term, requires a certain amount of patience, which is an attribute of—and rooted in—trust.  Trust is not required when we have instant gratification.  But when what is promised does not instantly happen, we must trust the promise will be fulfilled at some point.  This trust on which our hope rests leads us to expect that God will honor His promises.  Using Father Abraham as an example of the connection between faith and hope, the Apostle Paul speaks specifically about hope:  “*The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.…  In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, ‘So shall your descendants be.’  He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb.  No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised*.” (Romans 4: 13; 18-21)

All of this brings us back to our theme for 2023—Faith.  It is our faith in the Lord Jesus and His promises that gives us hope and courage to continue to be faithful in following Him.  He is the fulfillment of the promises made by our heavenly Father through all the ages—from Adam and Eve, through the prophets, and culminating in the ministry of John the Baptist who pointed to Jesus as the long-promised Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.  As the ancient Creeds of the Church bear witness: He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died and buried; rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.  In the meantime, we are called to live faithfully, trustfully and patiently—knowing that He will return, but not knowing when.  This is the faith to which we are called as children of God and heirs of eternal life.  In the meantime, as Paul reminded the Christians at Corinth—and continues to remind us—“*Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.  Let all that you do be done in love*.”  (1 Corinthians 16:13-14)