



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

The Reverend Dr. William J. Danaher, Jr.

"Faith" - The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost - 7/26/2020

[Lessons for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost](#)

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

One of my favorite stories that I learned when I was living in Canada is the story of a great tightrope walker. For some reason, he looms larger in the memory of Canadians than he does in the minds of Americans, but his name was Jean Francois Gravelet. He was known to us as Charles Blondin. He was born in 1824. He died in 1897. And Blondin was the first great daredevil of our age.

He was known for walking on a tightrope across Niagara Falls, a distance of 1,100 feet that he did over 23 minutes. He was suspended over the falls, about 160 feet over the falls, and he walked across back and forth before a crowd of about 25,000 people who gathered that day. His first move across, his first journey across happened in 1859. And then over the next year or two, he crossed the falls 300 times. And he began to kind of up the ante on all of the stakes that – he upped the ante on all of the suspense to keep the crowds coming.

So there's one instance where he actually carried out a small stove and cooked himself an omelet and ate it midway across. And another where he had the Maid of the Mist, the boat that carries people to see the falls, they kind of somehow sent him up some cake and champagne, which he ate and drank halfway across. It almost became routine.

But the first time that Blondin made it across and back, he stood before a group of spectators and he asked a question: do any of you believe that I could carry someone safely across and back across this tightrope? And the crowd burst into applause and cheers and said collectively, yes, we believe that you can do that. And then Blondin said, would any of you like to do that? Could I carry someone across? And no one stepped forward. And in that moment, that pause, Blondin says, yes, you have strong beliefs, but you have little faith.

Over the time in which Blondin was doing his different works of magnificence across the tightrope, he occasionally began to bring things across. And so one of the things in addition to the stove, and in addition to the thing with the cake, he actually took a wheelbarrow that he moved back and forth across. And initially he carried a heavy stone in the wheelbarrow, and then it was a sack of potatoes.

And then he asked the crowd again, if there was someone who would come and sit in the wheelbarrow, as he went across and back. Finally, one little old lady, so it reads, came out from the crowd and sat down in the wheelbarrow, and he carried her across and back. It was Blondin's mother who did that.

The second time someone allowed themselves to be carried across and back on the tightrope. It was Blondin's manager. Harry Colcord. And the picture that I have before you today is an actual picture from the Smithsonian and has Blondin with his manager on his back. For some reason, we don't have any photographs of the mother, only a couple of illustrations. And you can see this moment of intense concentration, Blondin's eyes and face, and you could see that there's a very different expression on the face of his manager, Harry.

I bring this up before you today because the theme of the sermon and the themes of the sermons that we're doing over the next few weeks has been on the Fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5:22. And today we focus on faith. What is faith? For Blondin, it meant something more than just strong belief. Faith meant something more daring, something more desperate, something more vulnerable, something more deliberate than simply asserting an opinion or sharing a fact or stating the truth.

When we have faith, we put our whole self and trust in the thing that we believe in. To have faith is to somehow commit our whole self to what we're doing. And it often feels like, at the time, as if we are walking on a tightrope or are suspended over falls or even encountering great peril. And I say this because I think that we are living in a time of very strong beliefs. We're living in a time in which the convictions, if we have them, are held onto with incredible vigor and with incredible tenacity and even ferocity.

But we are in a time, it seems to me, where we have little faith. Faith is something different than belief. Faith is something different than opinion. Faith is something different than the settlement of your mind. Faith requires a commitment of your whole self. And that means that faith is terrifying sometimes, particularly when we're in the midst of times, in which we don't know exactly how things will turn out. When we are surrounded by peril, when we are afraid or anxious or fearful over what may happen, faith asks us to step out and to put our foot on the cord and to begin to walk and to trust.

There are three things I want to bring before you today that speak about faith. All of these go with the grain of the parables Jesus shares in the Gospel of Matthew, because in many ways, the Gospel of Matthew is a gospel about faith. Just before

Jesus shares this parable, there is a moment in which Jesus walks on the water and sits with the disciples who fear that their boat is going to sink in the storm, and He calms it with a word. And then Jesus says to them, "Oh, ye of little faith."

And this wonderful group of parables that we have for you today, all of them seem to somehow go with the grain of the total commitment of faith. And we can see in that first parable about the mustard seed, a phrase that Jesus repeats later on in Matthew, in which he says, if you had but the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain be moved and it would be moved. So the parables we have today about the mustard seed, about how it grows, of the yeast that somehow infects the whole lump of dough, of the treasure hidden in the field, of the pearl of great price. All of these parables are parables of faith because in each of them, there is a moment of trust. There's a moment in which we let go of our control of something and put ourselves out there and let the yeast grow, and let the plant grow, and buy the field, and purchase the pearl.

Faith runs through the Gospel of Matthew. And the image that I wanted to bring for you today about Blondin is meant to highlight three things that I think are important for us to see: the first is that faith is based in relationship. The first person who has the ability and the temerity, the courage to sit in the wheelbarrow and to be ferried back and forth across Niagara Falls is Blondin's mother. She had a relationship with her son. She knew she could trust him. She knew what he could do, but she also followed the instincts that she had, that that relationship would hold in spite of the peril. So faith begins and is based in relationship.

The second I want to say is that faith is rooted in intimacy. You see that not only in the fact that only a mother could put the kind of trust, it seems that Blondin's mother put in him, but also the fact that when his manager got on his back and allowed himself to be carried back and forth by Blondin across the falls, there was a necessity. There had to be a kind of intimacy between the two.

In fact, in one account of this that I found online from the Smithsonian institution, there was this coaching that Blondin gave to his manager, Harry Colcord, before he got on his back and stepped on the tightrope. Blondin said to him, look up, Harry. You are no longer Colcord. You are Blondin. Until I clear this place, be a part of me, mind, body, and soul. If I sway, sway with me, do not attempt any balancing of yourself. If you do, we will both go to our death. So faith requires a kind of intimacy, a kind of willingness to let go of ourselves and to be bound to another, to cleave to another, to sway when that person sways, and to be bound together, body and mind and soul.

And this is a good image of faith because faith is grounded in Christ. And when we have a belief in Christ, we ride on his shoulders as he makes his way to eternity. And faith means that we learn to let ourselves be bound to Christ body, mind, and soul, and to sway where Jesus sways.

The final thing that I want to bring before you today is our faith reflects and echoes God's faithfulness. At the end of the service, we're going to sing a hymn, which is not part of our handle, but is part of the canon of American Christianity. And it's one of the great hymns. It's known as Great is Thy Faithfulness. The first line goes like this:

"Great is thy faithfulness," O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be

"Great is thy faithfulness!" "Great is Thy Faithfulness!"
Morning by morning, new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
"Great is Thy Faithfulness," Lord unto me!

This hymn is not simply an encouragement to our faith, but it's a promise and a claim that God is faithful, that God will redeem all that God has made, that God loves us and will transform us into the image of his son, that God will not abandon us when we go through difficult times. Blondin gathered a crowd because he walked across a tightrope without any net or any kind of safety cable on him, but the good news of the gospel is that God always surrounds us with God's loving providential care. God is always with us, even when we feel terrified to the core, even when we are forced to feel as if we are walking on a tightrope, God is with us. And that is meant to assure us that when we are being faithful, God will be faithful to us. And God has already been faithful to us.

I have two images I want to finish with today. Two images for you to think, because the challenge for you is to ask the question, in what way are you being asked to be faithful? And I have two images that kind of go with the grain of this theme. The first is to just share a story about a parishioner I ran into recently.

I was walking for exercise. And as I was making my way home, she pulled over next to me and got out of her car and ran up and said, "I want to let you know something." I said, "Sure." She said, "In March, when I was holed up during the pandemic and everybody was sheltering in place, I began to drink too much. And I began to realize that my addiction to alcohol had become unmanageable and that I was starting to sink. And so I decided to take steps and I entered rehab in June. Now I am back and I am so much better. I am so grateful to God and to this church and to everything that I have in my life now, thanks to the fact that I was able to surrender my control over alcohol and to accept help."

And I shared with her a little bit of the image of Blondin. I said, "Did you feel like you were walking across a tightrope?" And she said, "No, I felt like I was walking across a plank, but I kept walking."

What is the thing that terrifies you? What is the thing that fills you with fear? What is the part of yourself that forces you to almost withdraw from having faith? Is it the fear of losing a child forever? Of a child who gets lost or dies? Is it a career that you are nervous about as you watch the world change around you under your feet? Is it a sickness that you're struggling with? Is it something that is gnawing at you and making you feel unsettled and questioning your very ability to thrive and be happy and whole in this world? All of these things, faith begins where belief ends and faith will see us through.

The second image I want to bring before you today is a poem by one of my favorite poets in writing today. His name is Christian Wiman. Christian Wiman came to believe in God, got engaged, and was diagnosed with a chronic and terminal cancer in the same year. And his poetry is stunning. He actually has a poem that picks up on this theme of Niagara Falls, except he's not walking on a tightrope. This is what he writes.

My quiet
Niagara
of unnamable
things
over again
I go
in my barrel
of prayer

"My Quiet Niagara." Here he's identifying not so much the tumult outside of us and the disquiet and disease around us, so much as the disquiet within us, and the disease that is hidden inside of us and the tumult that we cannot control, the chaos and anxiety we experience that might be hidden from view. "My Quiet Niagara of unnamable things," of the things that fill us with fear, of the things that fill us with anxiety, the things that cause us to dread, of the things that bring us to the precipice of despair. "Over again I go in my barrel of prayer." Prayer is the barrel that keeps you safe as you go over the falls of this life.

As you go over the falls and face the rapids and rough water of the culture we live in these days and the society we are trying so hard to serve. As a nation, we hope we can heal. "Over again I go in my barrel of prayer." To be prayerful in this time is to be faithful, is to have faith.

So today I want to ask you a few questions. Where are you given this complex image of faith? Do you find yourself in a barrel going over the falls? If so, how can your prayer be changed? Do you find yourself riding on the shoulders of Jesus and trying to sway when he sways? If that's the case, how can you sway better? How can you let yourself be molded to the figure of Christ in you? To the life of Christ that lives inside of you, how can you be one with Christ in body, mind, and soul?

And finally, where is your faith tested most? Where is your faith tested most? It's where we have the least faith that God calls us to be most faithful. And in the face of that fear, what promise of God can you claim as yours? Given and to you before the foundation of the world so that you would know that even though you feel like you're walking on a tightrope or going underwater, God loves you, God is with you, and God will be with you always.

Amen.