

“What’s the Most Important Part of Faith?”

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James 2:14-17; Matthew 15:21-28

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21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Twelve years ago, a play called “The Christians,” made its premiere in Louisville. It’s a story about a church—what feels like a non-denominational, evangelical congregation—and it’s a church that has experienced terrific growth, going from a small storefront to a brand new church building.

The debt on this new building has just been paid off.  
The church is feeling good about itself.  
And one Sunday, Pastor Paul preaches a sermon.

It’s a sermon in which he says he doesn’t believe in hell.  
At least, not in the eternal, after-you-die kind of hell.  
It’s an admission that SHOCKS many people in his church.

His associate pastor, Joshua, thinks Pastor Paul is wrong.  
And Joshua leaves the church, and many of the church’s congregants follow Joshua, and it causes a split.

In one of the more poignant scenes in the play, a parishioner named Jenny approaches Pastor Paul, and says that some of those who heard his sermon are bothered not just by what he said,  
but also by when he said it.

“...the timing seemed too convenient...if you had done this before the church was paid off and people had left, then you’d be in a bad spot...[but] once the church was paid off, you could risk losing money and tell us what you really thought....why didn’t you tell us that earlier?”

“What would I have said?” asks Pastor Paul.

“That you’re not certain about certain things we believe,” replies Jenny.

“Would that have made you feel better,” Pastor Paul asks, “to hear me get up here and say that I don’t know?”<sup>1</sup>

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One of the questions that play raises, I think, is our question for today:

**“What’s the most important part of faith?”**

Is it what each of us believes?  
Is it keeping unity in our community?  
Or is it something else?

Belief is certainly important.  
Let’s move from that imaginary congregation to this congregation.  
I want to begin by giving y’all a compliment.

You did an excellent job singing an UNFAMILIAR hymn this morning, first thing out of the gates! Now I know...it’s not your favorite thing to do. And Marlon and I don’t usually ask you to begin worship singing a hymn that sounds mighty strange to many of you.

But I hope the words didn’t sound too strange.  
We chose that hymn because it’s a sung version of the Apostles’ Creed.

Did any of you notice that?  
It was a hymn about belief.  
When it comes to Christian faith, is that what’s most important?

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<sup>1</sup> Lucas Hnath, “The Christians,” New York: The Overlook Press, 2016.

What we believe about God is definitely important.  
 We hear it in our creeds.  
 Where else do we hear it?  
 How about every time we have a baptism?

The fourth question that we ask parents:

“Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?”

That’s a question about belief.

To say that Jesus is Lord.  
 To say that Jesus is Savior.

Those are the cornerstones, if you will, when it comes to Christian faith.

Is that the most important part of faith?  
 Many of you might say yes.

But if the writer of the letter of James were with us today, he would raise his hand and say...no. He would say that yes, belief is fine, but it’s not enough. You’ve got to have works. You see, the book of James is all about how we put our beliefs into action.

Chapter two begins like this:

“My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Jesus Christ?”

Then, in verse 14:

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked

and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace’...and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

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The poet Christian Wiman and the theologian Miroslav Volf are colleagues at Yale Divinity School. They published a book recently that’s a collection of their email correspondence over a recent two-year period. And yes, as a pastor, I bought a book of email correspondence between two professors, kind of nerded out on that book this past summer, absolutely loved it, as they go back and forth about different theological concepts, sometimes asking one another deep theological questions and sometimes more random questions—like does an octopus have a soul?

Actually, I think that’s a fascinating question.  
How many of you believe that an octopus has a soul?  
You don’t have to raise your hand.  
I’ll save that one for another sermon.

In one email, the esoteric questions disappear, and Wiman describes a trip that he took with his wife and two daughters, visiting his extended family, in Texas....

His mother and siblings live near Ft. Worth.

*My sister’s other son, Michael, lives with his wife and infant daughter down the road...Michael and his wife are strict Church of Christ people...”*

Meaning no instrumental music in worship.  
Meaning no women leading in worship.

*[It's a] church [he writes to his friend, Miroslav—that] subscribes to dogmas you and I would both find appalling.*

*Michael and his wife...persuaded us to spend a morning working in a food bank at the church. The poverty was shocking, a seemingly endless line of cars with all manner of misery spilling out...Equally shocking was how hard everyone was working to package the food, load the carts, and deliver them to the waiting families...*

*it was 106 degrees...*

*In that food bank, Wiman writes, I didn't hear a word about God. The recipients were not evangelized in any way, not even with a piece of paper that invited them to church...They simply drove away with their trunks filled with food.*

*By the end we were all drenched in sweat, our egos incinerated...  
[and] it was the best thing we did [on our vacation].<sup>2</sup>*

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What's the most important part of faith?

Maybe it depends on when in our lives we ask that question.

Is it our work—the way we live our faith in the world?

Maybe if you're newly retired, that's the most important question.

Maybe if you're looking for a new church home, BELIEF becomes the most important question...what we believe about God and how God welcomes everyone, showing no distinction among God's children when it comes to God's grace...is all that aligned with your beliefs?

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<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf & Christian Wiman, "Glimmerings: Letters on Faith Between a Poet and a Theologian," New York: HarperCollins, 2026.

## **What's the most important part of faith?**

I think we get yet another answer in our second text.

You heard the story, a woman is desperate for her daughter to be healed. So she calls out to Jesus: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

And Matthew writes:

"But he did not answer her at all."

Then the disciples approach Jesus:

"Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

So Jesus says to the woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

To which she replies, "Lord, help me."

To which he replies, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

To which she replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

And Jesus says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

I wonder if there was a time in your life when THAT was the most important part of faith.

Not a set of beliefs.

Not a resume of good works.

But tenacity. Persistence.

A recognition that we are all, deep down, just as desperate as that Canaanite woman, just as dependent on God for God's help and grace, and in those moments of desperation, being willing, like she was, to grab God by the collar, and says:

"I'm not letting you go..."

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Last Sunday evening, I was piddling around the house, considering what snack I wanted before dinner, and I looked at the calendar on my iPhone to see what my schedule looked like at work for the next day.

But it wasn't my Monday schedule that got my attention.  
It was the date. October 12...

And I said to myself, holy buckets!  
Tomorrow is my wedding anniversary!

I mean, who forgets their wedding anniversary until 6p the night before?

Yours truly, that's who.  
But thankfully, the Holy Spirit intervened at that moment.  
Reminded me at that moment that I had something very important to do: get an anniversary card for my wife!

So, I told Heather that I had an errand to run at Target, and to cover my tracks, before she could ask me what I was getting, I decided to be helpful by asking her if she needed me to get her anything at Target too.

Covering up one's own forgetfulness with altruism.  
Always a good strategy, right?

And off I go to get an anniversary card.

Park my car in the Target parking lot.  
Start walking toward the store.  
An SUV pulls up next to me.

The window comes down.  
The driver starts talking to me.

She's a bit disheveled.  
Her clothes are dirty.  
And she's holding up something that she wants me to see.

"Excuse me, sir, can you please help me? I need more of this Palmer's Cocoa Butter. They sell it here at Target, it's in the section with the hair products...my hands, oh Lord, I need it for my hands. Are you heading into the store right now? Would you please get one for me? It only costs \$6...I really need it. Is that your car? I'll park right here next to your car and wait for you."

Now, to be completely honest, the whole time she was talking to me, I was trying to figure out how to get out of it.

But she was persistent.  
She was tenacious.

And as I was standing there, listening to her, I suddenly had a memory of being in church with all of you, last Sunday morning, when I had said from this pulpit something about how much we all need one another, not just in here but out there...and being there in person for one another, friend and stranger alike, is the most important thing these days...

And it was at this point that I wanted the Holy Spirit to stop reminding me of things!

I had no reason not to help her, so I walked into Target, bought the anniversary card, and looked for the Palmer's Cocoa Butter. And looked some more. And I looked some more.

I asked for help, was pointed to an aisle, looked some more.

I couldn't find it, so I decided I would buy a gift card for the stranger, she can come in and get the Cocoa Butter herself. I took the gift card out to her...

Did you get it?

I couldn't find it. Here's a gift card, ma'am.

And she shook her head.

I can't go in there.

Would you just go back and look again?

Ma'am, I said, I asked for help.

I couldn't find it.

I know they have it, she said.

Please, just go in again.

I mean, we're talking persistence here, right?

So...I went in again.

I asked another attendant.

And this one was able to help me find the Palmer's Cocoa Butter.

I used the gift card I had just bought.

Bought two containers of Cocoa Butter for her.

I took them out to her.

And she smiled.

And she said thank you.

And then, just as I was closing the car door, she let out a scream.

And I just about jumped out of my skin.

She looked at me and said: The Holy Ghost!!  
The Holy Ghost!!!

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I have no idea what that was all about.  
But I do know this.

I was going to Target to do one thing.

And a stranger's persistence...  
her tenacity...  
it caused me to do something else as well.

And I wonder if it happened to Jesus that way too.

You see, in our text Matthew, I think Jesus was on a mission. And at that point in his ministry, he really did believe that he was only sent for the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

And nothing was going to distract him from that mission.

After all, back in chapter 10, he tells his disciples, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But then in chapter 15, he encounters this Canaanite woman.  
This Gentile woman.  
Whose faith was so tenacious, she wouldn't let him go.

So Jesus heals that woman's daughter, and then...I wonder, if the Holy Spirit was at work in Jesus, not only that day, but the rest of his days, changing the way that he thought about his ministry.



Stubborn about something.  
Open my mind, Lord...open my heart...  
so that my love for you and for neighbor would grow.

What do you think will happen if you prayed a prayer like that  
tonight?

Who knows...  
it might be just the invitation that the Spirit of God,  
the HOLY GHOST—  
was hoping to hear from you...

Amen.