

TITLE: "The Rabbit's Share"

TEXT: Luke 4:1-13 (NT p. 61)

Introduction – How strong is faith's rope?

Let me begin with a story. It takes place at a monastery in Europe that is perched on a cliff. The only way to reach the monastery is to be suspended in a basket, which is pulled to the top by several monks who haul and tug with all their strength. Obviously, the slow ascent up the several-hundred foot cliff is terrifying.

Once, a tourist became exceedingly nervous about halfway up as he noticed that the rope by which he was suspended was old and frayed. With a trembling voice he asked the monk who was riding with him in the basket how often they changed the rope. The monk thought for a moment and said (brusquely), "Whenever it breaks" (Parables, Etc. 8/94 filed under "Faith").

Some people imagine faith to be a frayed rope. They equate faith with surrendering their rational thinking process so faith makes them uncomfortable. Others are leery because they think faith has to do with passing some sort of test administered by God. Others do not realize that there are two aspects of faith and they confuse one with the other. So this morning I want to sort out what is meant by faith.

1. Faith and feelings

Last week someone told me, "I don't accept something is true unless it makes sense to me." Lots of people would say the same thing and they are wary of faith because it DOESN'T seem to make sense. However, if you think about it, you will realize that we ALL accept things that do not make sense.

I will be attending a seminar for ministers in a few weeks. I made my course reservation, but kept putting off making airline reservations. I told myself that because of all the security procedures, delays, lost luggage and tasteless food (if there is any food at all) it is no longer any fun to fly. But the real reason is terrorism. The thought of being blown out of the air at 20,000 feet does not appeal to me, at least subconsciously.

I know the statistics. It is far safer to fly than to drive a car. The chances of being in a plane sabotaged by a terrorist are millions to one. Rationally, it is safer to get on a plane than it is to cross a street in Ithaca. My brain KNOWS this, and I did finally make plane reservations, but that irrational fear lingers. The fact is that we DO accept things that don't make sense.

Let us examine temptation, since that is the subject of our biblical text this morning. Only those who try to resist temptation know how hard it is. I read about a teenager who was caught shop lifting several times. He said, "I see something I want and say to myself, 'Why not take it?'" People who run afoul of the law often do not know what it is like to resist temptation.

In our text, Jesus was NOT fasting because it was easy for him to fast. By the end of forty days, he was starving. He was fasting because he knew that he had to be able to resist Satan even when he was at his lowest and weakest ebb. If he was not able to resist Satan when he was weak with hunger, he knew that he would not be able to resist the temptation to avoid being crucified for our sins.

My point is that even the most rationally-minded person is not rational about everything and there are times when we each must subdue a mood or a feeling in order to achieve an objective. And the more important the objective, the harder it is to resist the temptation to do otherwise.

That is why some are confused about faith. They think that faith should be easy, that it should come automatically, that they should WANT to be faithful. Over the years, I have invited hundreds of people to come to a church service. The #1 reason they don't? "I sleep in on Sundays." The #1 reason children do not attend Sunday school? They don't FEEL like going. Many parents then add, "And I leave it up to them."

If I had gone to school only when I felt like it, I would never have graduated first grade. Faith, like everything worthwhile in life, does not come easy. We each must WORK to keep our faith alive and healthy. That is why it is so important to GO to church, READ the Bible, COME to Adult Sunday school, GET INVOLVED with helping people, READ a daily devotional, JOIN a church group or committee. If an education or a job is important enough to stick to, how much MORE important is it to stick to our faith, which will determine where we will spend eternity?

2. Faith and works

An elderly man was diagnosed with a terminal disease and his daughter found him reading the Bible. She said, "Dad, you have NEVER gone to church OR read the Bible, what's the story?" He said, "I'm cramming for finals."

Perhaps because of the educational emphasis in our society, there is a sense that God expects something from us in order to find us acceptable. This is NOT true, but the feeling often persists even among Christians. If it WERE true, what could we give God? God has everything, right? So there IS nothing we can actually give to God. THAT is the realization that God wants each and every one of us to reach: that there IS nothing we can give to God.

C. S. Lewis writes that once we have reached this realization (*Mere Christianity* p. 143):

Then comes another discovery. Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from moment to moment, is given you by God. If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to [God's] service you could not give [God] anything that was not in a sense [God's] own already.

So when we talk about [someone] doing anything for God or giving anything to God, I will tell you what it is really like. It is like a small child going to his father and saying, "Daddy, give me [a dollar] to buy you a birthday present." Of course, the father does, and he is pleased with the child's present. It is all very nice and proper, but only an idiot would think that the father is [a dollar] to the good in the transaction.

When a [person] has made these two discoveries [that you can give God nothing and that every capacity you have is given you by God] God can really go to work. It is after this that real life begins. The [person] is awake now. We can go on and talk about faith in the second sense.

3. Faith and Jesus Christ

What is the second stage of faith?

It is relinquishing the control of our lives,
and giving our lives to Jesus Christ,
trusting that Jesus will accept us as a sister or brother,

and help us from that point on,
to become more and more like Jesus
so that we can live with Jesus for all eternity.

That is the offer Jesus makes to us and faith is simply accepting that offer.

How much of this is our doing and how much is God's? ...During the Depression, a man was driving through the country when he saw a sign in front of a country store: "Rabbit Burgers—25 cents." Intrigued by both the idea and the price, he stopped, went inside and purchased one. While he was eating, he spoke to the storekeeper: "Are these made completely of rabbit meat?"

"They're mostly rabbit," the guy said.

"What do you mean by 'MOSTLY?'"

"I put in a little mule, too."

"What do you mean by 'a LITTLE?'"

"Fifty – fifty" said the storekeeper.

"What do you mean by 'FIFTY - FIFTY?'"

The storekeeper said, "You know. You put in one rabbit and you put in one mule."

How much of the second stage of faith is OUR doing and how much is God's? The mule's share is up to God. If God did not put the desire to know Jesus in us, no one would have faith. But the rabbit share of faith IS up to us, and it is not easy.

Surrendering control of our lives to Jesus is a tough job. But once we DO, the rest becomes easier and more wonderful as time goes on.

The problem is that many people try to put in the mule's share. They want to be good people, they want to be successful, they want to feel worthy themselves and have God say to them that they have made a good grade, that they have done a good job and that they DESERVE God's acceptance and blessing. That's NOT the way faith works.

The following is by Karen Reno Knapp from the June '91 edition of *Decision Magazine*:

The bedroom door opened slightly. I could vaguely make out the small figure of Andrew, my seven-year-old son, standing in the doorway. I glanced at the clock. It was 2:45 a.m. "Mom, I need help!"

I quickly learned that Andrew was sick. He had vomited twice—once on the floor and once in the bathroom. After helping Andrew, I cleaned up everything and went back to bed. He was sick again at 4:15 a.m. This time, though, he successfully used the pan I had placed by his bed.

The following day my son was the opposite of his usually active, independent, loud, at times even boisterous, self. He followed me from room to room, collapsing in a heap on the floor, a bed or the couch. All day he sat or lay as close to me as possible. I didn't want him to be sick, but I did enjoy the dependence and the closeness. I had forgotten how vulnerable a seven-year-old really is.

Later that evening I reflected on our day together. When Andrew is healthy, he will often push me away because he has more important things to do. This day was different—because he needed me.

Conclusion – Let go and let God

Each of us will get to the point where we need God. Paul wrote, "When I am weak, then I am strong." Throw in the towel. Let God take control of your life and you will find what REAL life is and your life will get better and better forever and ever.

Amen.