**Building the Framework of Faith** Reason- Romans 12:1-3, Luke 8:4-8

We are continuing our series on Building the Framework of our Faith. We have looked at the importance of scripture as the basis for our faith and how it is revealed to us throughout our lives. We have also looked at how traditions of our faith can illumine, deepen and strengthen our understanding of our faith story. Now we look at how our human ability to think, to reason, can confirm our beliefs, our understanding and our faith.

A statement found in the United Methodist Book of Discipline offers a good understanding of this framework we call the quadrilateral:

"Wesley believed that the **living core of the Christian faith** was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, enlivened in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.

“These four elements taken together bring the individual Christian to a more mature and fulfilling understanding of the Christian faith and the natural response of worship and service.”

You might be asking yourself, why talk about reason before exploring the role that experience has on the development of our faith? Well, you would be right in asking that. The challenge is that experience and reason are closely connected and it could have been covered that way, but Ron and I just decided to lay it out like this. Ron will wrap up the series next week by tackling the role of experience in making our faith come alive.

Today, “the living core of the Christian Faith” . . . confirmed by reason.

Faith: revealed, illumed, enlivened and confirmed, confirmed by reason.

These ideas are captured by this poster I found on-line,

(Jesus died to take away your sins, not your mind”)

In 18th century England – a time when many in the church believed the use of reason was threatening to their faith, John Wesley wrote “It is a fundamental principle with us (the Methodists) that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.

This was a bold and courageous statement to make at that time. We like to think that we are open to new ideas, and we describe ourselves as having “Open Hearts, Open Doors and Open Minds”, but, sometimes I wonder. Sometimes, it feels like asking a question about our faith or about scripture is seen as being unfaithful or not believing.

In my first church I was teaching a bible study with a group of senior women when a troubling passage of scripture was raised for discussion. I admitted that I struggled with the meaning of these words and asked the group to share their thoughts. One lady who rarely spoke but always attended, slapped her leg and loudly proclaimed that she has always struggled with parts of the bible but had never been given permission to share those questions and explore those feelings. She was elated and became animated in sharing her faith and her questions of faith. She had been told that if she didn’t accept without questioning, she wasn’t being a true Christian believer, a true Christian. Struggling with her faith questions, using her God given mind to question, challenge and reason, she began a new journey that took her deeper and richer into her faith.

Owning our faith can be a little scary though. Sometimes, questions as to what we have held as truth can be seen as threatening. Why are you attacking my faith? Why are you attacking God? This is my understanding and I have held these things to be true since I was a child and now you are suggesting that they might not be true!? If this isn’t true, maybe nothing I believe is true. My only response is to fight back, to resist, to prove you wrong.

This is kind of where I was as I entered seminary in 2004. I was a businessman, working in high tech, traveling the world when this “calling to enter ministry” messed everything up. But I was pretty sure I had everything figured out, I had grown up in the church, attended Sunday School, youth fellowship, spiritual retreats and more. I just needed a couple of classes to refine things, fill in a couple of blanks and stuff like that.

What happened instead was that what I thought of as my faith was systematically dismantled and tossed aside. I wasn’t prepared for the challenges to my faith and my understanding of scripture and God.

The opening statement in my yearlong biblical studies class was that the Bible was like FUGU.

The professor said that if we got nothing else from her class, this was it. Fugu? What is Fugu? She then went on to explain that Fugu is sushi made from blowfish (pufferfish). Carefully and lovingly prepared it is a great delicacy and wonderfully filling meal. Prepared without understanding or care for what it is, it can kill you.

It can kill you? What was she talking about? And parts of the Bible reflect the human authors and not the word of God? This was nuts and I wasn’t going to take it.

These people (the professors and the other students) were crazy. I had lots of negative (and I admit a little nasty) labels I put on them as I hung on to my Sunday School faith and understanding. At least twice I considered quitting and walking away from what was obviously a big mistake. I remember waking up in the trailer I was living in to the song “I still believe” and thinking, I’m not so sure about that.

I thank God that Pastor Ray Dowdy, here in this church, encouraged me to hang in there and see if it didn’t get better…. And it did. Slowly, I began to own my own faith. I began to rebuild my faith from the basic building blocks of scripture, but with a new openness to understanding and interpretation (remember the comments about “historical/critical interpretation of the Bible?).

Now, I didn’t blindly accept faith concepts but dug in and explored and found a new richness in scripture. Difficult areas that I avoided before (because they didn’t make sense or challenged my faith), now opened up hard reflection on my faith, or the challenges in our world.

You could say that my seminary experience transformed not only my understanding of faith, scripture and religion; But it also transformed me personally, from the inside out, from my hopes and dreams to my biases and prejudices. The professors and students now appeared as other pilgrims on the journey, teaching and learning from one another.

This experience of being forced to think and reason out my faith confirmed what I believed, literally confirmed my faith by reason.

Thursday evenings at Folsom Prison can be hard. Two security checkpoints, a walk of about a half mile before the second security checkpoint opens onto a hot, dry and dusty enclosed space. Men dressed in blue jump suits walk a dirt track while some kick a soccer ball on a dirt field inside the walking track, others stand in small groups talking.

Another hundred yard walk and we enter a hot, stuffy chapel, just off the yard. Soon, 30 or so men in blue are escorted to the chapel where they gather for the next ninety minutes. Some simply escaping the boredom on their life, some seeking escape from the violence of their world, some seeking something more in their life.

One evening, one of the men in blue I had come to know, stood up and began to speak to the other men in blue. He started quietly but quickly built energy and passion in his words and his expressions. Reading from the letter to the church in Rome, the same passage we just heard Neil read, he looked into everyone’s eyes, seemingly looking deeper, maybe into our souls. His words, given the location he was speaking from and who he was speaking to, rang in my heart and soul. His words struck a cord in the men incarcerated in one of the toughest prisons in California. His words struck a cord in the Kairos volunteers sitting among the men in blue.

“Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world.”

Imagine, carrying a life sentence, and possibly hearing these words of scripture “revealed” for the first time.

“Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is, what is good and pleasing and mature.”

As the speaker spoke these works, his voice grew louder and more intense. Surprisingly, getting in the face of many of the men in blue, stating that their faith in Christ was giving them a new hope, a new chance at life. A chance that they were abusing with the way they were living. Coming to faith and then continuing to do drugs, continuing to live a gang life of violence, acting one way on the “Yard” and differently in the chapel.

Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. He was arguing for them to explore Scripture, get involved in study groups, continue their education and be strengthened and renewed in worship . . . Use your God given brain to think for yourself. Own your faith, own who you are.

Own, whose you are and all that means.

This prison leader was calling on the other men in blue to grow up, to mature in their faith, to be a thinking Christian.

Our Gospel story on the sower can also be seen as a parable of scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Jesus told a story kind of like this…..

A sower went out to sow his seed, to **revea**l his word. Some of it fell on the road where it was trampled down, it had no support or encouragement by fellow believers, or the **traditions** of the church.

Some fell on rocks and gravel where it sprouted, but withered because it was sometimes hard and dry, it didn’t **experience** meaning and change in their lives.

Other seed fell in the weeds and the weeds grew with it and choked it out. It had a chance as the word had been **revealed**, supported by rich **tradition** and **experience** of fellow believers, but it was a surface level faith that crumbled, was choked out by conflict, by hard messages and by those with their own agendas….

Other seed fell in rich earth and produced a bumper crop. Hearts and minds were open to the revelation of scripture, their faith was supported and illumined by tradition and fellow believers, it was made real by their own personal experiences and it was made strong and deep by owning, questioning and growing in reason, in the use of their God given mind.

The parable of the sower calls on us to also grow up, to mature in our faith, to own our own faith to not leave the thinking part of our faith to the “experts”, the scholars, your pastors. Like I discovered in seminary, we must ultimately choose to think for ourselves, to engage in bible studies, discussions, reading and then decide just what it is we believe and why.

I mentioned in the telling of my personal story that I had believed that I had things pretty well figured out before the seminary experience. One of the most important things I took away from that seminary experience was that I didn’t have to have all the answers. That God is in some ways beyond our human understanding and that we might not have “all the answers” until we stand before Jesus at the end of our life.

And that’s OK; in fact, it is so much better than having to claim that I have all the answers, instead, inviting others to join me on a path of discovery and exploration that draws us together rather than forces us into opposing camps. Using our God given brains to reason out as best we can this glorious mystery of faith is a journey of grace, forgiveness, and openness to other ideas, other understandings.

These things I believe . . . . . . These things, the core of my faith continue to be confirmed in my conversations, in my questioning, my study and my worship. I thank God that ours is not a blind and fearful faith but a transforming faith that is revealed in scripture, illumined by tradition, enlivened in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.

Prayer - Amen