

A DARING FAITH

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
October 28, 1984

I Thessalonians 1:2-8

A proud graduate of first grade said to his teacher, "I sure do like you. I'd like to stay in first grade forever, but I've been promoted. Boy, I wish you knew enough to teach me in the second grade." Some would like to stay in first grade forever--where the choices are simpler, the intellectual demands are not as severe, the simpler days where the status quo is maintained and revered.

But, these are not days for comfort and complacency. We are promoted to new challenges. To succeed these days--as individuals, as families, and as a church--we need A DARING HOPE, A DARING LOVE, AND A DARING FAITH. Paul remembered and commended the Thessalonian Christians for their "work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Thessalonians 1:3) Paul was especially impressed by their faith. In 1:8 he wrote, "The news about your faith in God has gone everywhere." What a statement! What a witness! Wouldn't it be something if that were said about us, "The news about the faith of the First United Methodist Church in God has gone everywhere."

Martin Luther defined faith as a "living, daring confidence in God's grace." It is significant that Luther used the word "daring," for his life as the leader of the Protestant Reformation was truly daring, a journey of daring faith.

If I may be personal, I believe my presence in this pulpit is a journey of faith. I believe that my appointment to this church is God's will. That is a faith statement. Without a direct word, without absolute evidence, without the pieces of the puzzle fitting neatly together, believing that my appointment to this church is God's will is a faith statement. Of course, that is what faith presumes. If you are absolutely certain, then there is no call for faith.

Daring faith involves risk. I asked myself: Should I go to Palo Alto First? Modesto First did not want us to leave. They were quite upset. Should I go to Palo Alto? What if it doesn't work? What if my ministry does not succeed? What if my style, my preaching, my leadership are not what the church needs at this time? How presumptuous of me to assume that I am the minister the church needs at this time. Yes, there were and there are doubts. There are risks.

I not only risked my career, but the family as well. I uprooted my youngest son, Craig, and my wife, Ellie. Ellie did not want to come here. She was perfectly happy in Modesto. She loved her house. She was settled; everything was in its place. She admits that is a bad sign, however, for as soon as she is settled and begins to relax, I move her! She doesn't like to move. She is not "half-gypsy" as I am. She is a Swede, and Swedes don't move easily. They plant roots--deep roots, firmly imbedded. It takes an earthquake to move a Swede! But, she loves me and she promised years ago, as did Ruth, "Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge." That is a heavy responsibility on me. In daring faith, I uprooted her because I believe it is God's will for me to be here.

How does one know God's will? Kazantzakis, in his moving novel about St. Francis of Assisi, has Brother Leo, Francis' companion, ask Francis, "How do you know what is God's will?" That is the agonizing cry of the Christian, "How do I know God's will?" That is the agonizing cry of anyone who wants to make his/her life count, "How do I know the purpose of my life?" Francis, who left the comfort of his father's wealth, who only owned the robe on his back, who took the vow of poverty, who gave his life for the poor, Francis of Assisi looked at Brother Leo, considered the question, and answered, "Whatever is the most difficult. That is God's will." If that answer is too stark, too uncomfortable, turn it around. God's will is not whatever is the easier or the more comfortable.

Before you turn me off completely, feeling that it's too difficult, or not practical, let me hasten to point out the biblical truth: You do not walk alone. Nor, do you decide alone. Nor, do you struggle with God's will alone. Nor, do you conjure up faith out of your own resources. No, because faith is a gift. Paul, in the list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, includes faith.

Our faith is predicated on God's faithfulness. The foundation is God's faithfulness, not your ability or inability to have faith. God has acted on your behalf, and acts on your behalf. God has come to you through the life of Jesus Christ, and is present with you in the Holy Spirit. God has faith in you and has taken great risks on your behalf. God is faithful and will keep the word.

Faith, the ability to trust in God, is a gift from God. When you doubt your ability to hang in there and to walk in faith, when you doubt your ability to trust, remember and rejoice in the truth that it is not your faith which saves you, but God's faithfulness. What God desires from you, God inspires from you. What God wills for you--purposes for you--has been implanted in you already as a desire, a yearning.

Your part is to respond, respond in faith, and act on the faith. God gives you the faith; your response is to walk in faith. Trust God with your life. Trust God with your vocation. Trust God with your possessions, your money. Trust God and respond as a steward, a caretaker of God's earth. Trust God with 10% and more, believing there is enough left to take care of you; for when you give, you will receive.

Of course, there is risk. Risk is the underside of faith, but a daring faith takes risk in stride. Risk is the waiting period between the vision of God's will and its fulfillment. "Risk is raw trust in God's power to see us through," writes Lloyd Ogilvie and then tells of the woman who lamented, "I've avoided risks all my life, and now I am old and all I have is a million what-might-have-beens."

A daring faith takes the risks and acts as if the faith object is true. In spite of evidence to the contrary, in spite of the lack of sure evidence, in spite of the "wisdom" of common sense, a daring faith sees the will of God (has a vision of the will of God) and walks, acts in the faith that the vision not only will come true, but that it already has come true. To live faithfully is to live as if the victory of God over the world has already occurred.

In fact, a daring faith thanks God in advance. Over a period of 60 years in Bristol, England, George Muller cared for more than 10,000 orphans on faith. One day when he had no food to feed hundreds of hungry children seated expectantly at the breakfast table, he prayed in daring faith, "Father, we thank Thee for the food Thou art going to give us." Imagine the audacity, the daring faith! After a pause, there was a knock on the door. It was a baker who said that he had awakened at 2:00 a.m. with a strong urge to bake bread for the children. Shortly after, a milkman knocked at the door, "My milk wagon just broke down in front of your place. I must get rid of these cans of milk. Can you use the milk?" God meets need, God moves mountains, for those who dare.

A daring faith trusts in God and expects God to make all things possible. Lloyd Ogilvie writes, "Most of us expect little from God and are not disappointed." A daring faith expects much and takes the waiting period--the risk--in stride.

A church, like other organizations, is basically comprised of three concentric circles. The inner circle, the core of the church, is comprised of the totally committed. These are those persons who walk in faith, who trust God with their lives. They believe in the church and pray for its success. They tithe by giving 10% or more. They are not necessarily the rich. God does not measure the amount of our giving, but our faithfulness. That is why the tithe is measured in percentages, not dollars. We are all equal.

The next circle in a church is a much larger circle. These are the persons who are on their faith journey, but have not yet arrived in the inner circle. They support and work. These friends are nurtured, loved, encouraged and wanted, for they care about the church and its ministry and are at various stages of their journey.

The outer circle are the fringe members. They are out on the edge and not involved. Because of the unique history of our church, this circle is quite large. Many of you who have been calling on behalf of the finance campaign have been confronted by the hurt, anger, indifference or lethargy of this circle. Let us pray for their healing, invite them to Christ and back to the church, but let's not be discouraged by their number. Let's not be defeated; but, instead, let's praise God for all the people we have in the middle and inner circles. God is alive! Our church is alive!

In which circle are you? Where are you in your faith journey! If you are in the outer circle, I invite you to come on in! If you have a closet of "what-might-have-beens," risk! It's warm in here. There is love and joy in here. If you are not a pray-er, I invite you to join those who pray daily for our church, for the ministers and staff, for one another, that God may use us, that we may see God's vision for this church, plan accordingly and walk in faith, trusting God to provide the resources. If you are not yet a tither, I invite you to make plans. Increase your giving by 1%; if you are now giving 5%, increase 1% and begin giving 6%. Make a plan to reach the tithe level.

Come on inside the circle to the joy. Let me not create the impression that living by hope, love and faith is a dreary, somber business. To be faithful, to be in right relationship with Jesus Christ, is the most joyful experience there is. When you do what you know is right, the sense of fulfillment, the satisfaction, is overpowering and overwhelming. It is fun to be one of God's people. There is joy unspeakable when you are faithful to God. There is love and fellowship to be in company with your fellow daring believers. A daring faith is not uptight, painful, joyless and sanctimonious. A daring faith is free, joyful, happy and radiant.

In the early days of the Montana gold rush, a small party of prospectors struck it rich, but they needed more equipment to mine the rich vein. Before returning to town, each prospector swore with his life that he would carefully guard the secret. They returned to town, bought the equipment, but on the return journey were followed by 300 people! Did one of them tell? No, their beaming faces betrayed their secret!

I see beaming faces around our church these days. I invite all of you to step out in daring faith, discover the joy of Christ, and attract others by your beaming faces. Oh, wouldn't it be something if, like the Thessalonian Christians, the news of our faith in God spread everywhere!

A DARING FAITH

DOUGLAS NORRIS

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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