

# **“Faith Conversations”**

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First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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Do you like guessing games? Some people do. Some don't. But whether you do, or whether you don't, play along with me this morning, will you?

Before we get to the game though, let me give you a little background. The guess I want you all to make this morning concerns a "Statement of Faith;" actually, two of them. And for those of you who haven't written a Faith-Statement recently there are two contexts in the church where they usually get used. One's in Confirmation classes and the other's in examinations for pastors.

Now on the face of it, those would appear to be very different contexts, right? I mean it's one thing to talk about the kind of faith that someone finds in a Confirmation class. It's another thing to talk about the faith someone studies in a seminary or gives away as a pastor. But believe it or not, when it comes to statements of faith sometimes it's hard to tell which is which!

And that was the case for me this week because on Wednesday evening I was at the final meeting of our Confirmation class here at First. And yesterday morning I was at a meeting of our Presbytery. So now that you have the background, here's the guessing game I'd like you to play. I'm going to read part of two "Statements of Faith" to you. One of them comes from a Confirmation student in our church. The other comes from a minister who was seeking membership in our Presbytery. I'd like you to try and guess which is which.

Faith-Statement #1

"I believe in the one and only God; the One who created us, and whose love for us is never-ending. I believe in His covenant with Abraham, which He has never broken, and in the Bible that contains God's word for us."

Faith-Statement #2

"I believe in one God, who was, and is, and is to come. I believe God is the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen. In the beginning God moved over the waters of chaos, calling all there is into being."

Now I'd like to see a show of hands. How many of you think the first statement came from the Confirmation student? How many of you think it came from the Pastor? OK, now let's try it the other way. How about the second statement. How many of you think it came from the Confirmation student? How many from the Pastor?

Well I can tell you one thing. Some of you are going to be surprised! Because the truth is the first statement came from the Pastor and the second one came from a student in our Confirmation class right here at First!

Surprised? Well don't be. Because sometimes a Confirmation Class can produce amazing results. Sometimes it can produce what Paul calls "sincere faith." And when it does there's real cause for rejoicing, at least according to Paul. But what is "sincere faith" and why is it so special that Paul singles it out in Second Timothy and makes it the basis for his a special prayer at the end of his life?

For that's when Second Timothy was written, you know. It was written according to its own words, near the end of Paul's life. It's the last letter that comes from his pen. It contains some of his final thoughts. And it begins with a prayer. It's another one of those "remembering prayers" that you find so often in the Bible and so seldom on our lips. But it's on Paul's lips and it comes from his heart. And at the center of the prayer is a sentence that still makes us smile still; twenty centuries after it was written.

"I'm reminded," Paul tells Timothy "of your sincere faith; how it lived first in your grandmother, Lois, then in your mother, Eunice; and now it lives, I'm persuaded, in you." And the reason that sentence still makes us smile on a Confirmation Sunday and especially a Mother's Day Confirmation Sunday is because it shows us so clearly one thing that makes "sincere faith" so special.

For it shows us that "sincere faith" often starts as a seed, a seed God plants in the heart of a child through the witness of a mother. It happened in my life. I imagine it happened in lots of your lives too. But one of the ways God planted a seed of faith in my heart happened like this.

When I was three or four years old I didn't like thunder. At the time we lived in a two story house outside Akron, Ohio. The house had a landing. It was on the stairs between the first and the second floor. And on the landing were two screen windows that we kept open all the time in the summer to try and catch the breeze.

One day as a storm started my mother picked me up and carried me up to the landing. She sat down in front of the open screen windows and put me in her

lap. "We're going to listen to the thunder together," she said. And somewhere in the middle of the storm, she sang these words.

(Actually I'm not sure she sang them for me. I think she sang them for herself and for God and let me listen in because she was looking out the window when she sang ... "Oh Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds Thy hand has made. I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder. Thy power thorough out the universe displayed.") And she sang like the storm could hear her. And after she sang she turned and looked at me and she smiled.

And I don't know whether it was her song or her smile that changed my mind. But ever since that day, the sound of thunder has reminded me of the hymn. So much so that when I hear thunder even now, it makes me smile sometimes just like my mother did that day back in Ohio.

That's one of my stories. Now how about you? Because I'm sure if we had the time we could talk quite a while today about the different ways that "sincere faith" got started, got "seeded" into the hearts of many of us by our mothers or our grandmothers. But even though that's where it starts, it's not where it ends, is it? For "sincere faith" is not only a faith that's "seeded." It's also a faith that's cultivated. And that's what Confirmation's all about.

So indulge me for a minute will you? And let me read you another couple of sentences from of a "Faith Statement" written by a member of this year's Confirmation Class. Because I think it illustrates this truth perfectly. "Before I went to Confirmation," this student writes, "I made a brick wall between God and me, only making things wrong. I stressed in school, and I've had bad things happen to me. I didn't even think of praying. Confirmation changed me. It changed the way I trust God."

You know, in Second Corinthians, Paul says all of us need to cultivate our faith. And the best way to cultivate it, he says, is to "examine yourselves; see whether you're holding on to real faith. Test yourselves. For don't you realize Jesus Christ is in you?" And it's that process of accepting Christ for ourselves, learning to trust him personally that makes faith genuine, isn't it? Making faith personal is what makes it powerful. Listen to another of our Confirmation students describe the process.

"Accepting Christ was the greatest thing I've ever done. Ever since, I don't feel alone when I'm alone. I know God is always with me ... And I believe that depression, and poverty, and everything else that savages our world is something God allows us to go through to show us that His love for us is something that can't be torn apart, but only embraced."

I don't know about you, but when I read words like that, I get goose-bumps. I think God does too. Because God gives us faith for a purpose and the purpose of faith is to allow us to grow. You see God wants our faith to grow from a seed of faith sown in our lives by parents into a plant cultivated by our own personal commitment to Christ because the truth is trusting God, having faith in the middle of fallen world full of hard questions isn't easy, is it? It takes more than simple faith. It takes sincere faith, faith that's faced the facts and convinced itself that God can still be trusted.

But there's one more step to having a "sincere faith" my friends. And it has to do with not with seeding faith, or cultivating faith. It has to do with allowing our faith to produce fruit.

Penn Jillette is half of a two man team. Together with his partner Teller he's been headlining in Las Vegas for over a decade now. As you might expect, headlining in Vegas doesn't usually lead to believing in God and Penn doesn't. But once on Larry King's show, Penn Jillette had a few words to say about the kind of faith he does and doesn't respect. Listen.

"I've always said, you know, I don't respect people who don't share their faith. If you believe that there's a heaven and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward ... I mean how much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them?"

Faith, my friends, was never meant just for us. Real faith, "sincere faith" was always meant for sharing. It's not simply supposed to be seeded in our lives by our parents. It's not only supposed to grow and be cultivated in our lives until it turns into a personal commitment to Christ. It's also supposed to bear fruit. It's also supposed to be shared.

That's why Paul goes on in Second Timothy to say to his friend, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead; in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, encourage; with great patience and careful instruction."

And before you let yourself off the hook and say Paul's words are only for preachers, listen to Jesus. "I chose you," he tells his disciples, "I chose you and appointed you that you should go out and bear fruit." It was those words from Jesus that finally convinced Courtney Ellis. She's a graduate student at Princeton. Listen to her story.

"When I attended Grad school for English, there were many occasions when my fellow students openly ridiculed the name of Christ. To my shame, I stayed silent. I was vocal about my faith in Christ at church and with my friends. But I was terrified of what might happen to my reputation if people at my school found out I had faith in Jesus.

One day though a fellow student asked me flat out, right before class, with other people were around, if I was a Christian. I was at a crossroads. I had a decision to make. Christ had appointed that moment for me. So I took a deep breath, had a quick conversation with God, and with His help I said a soft, shaky, "Yes." My classmate looked at me skeptically for a second. "Interesting," she said. "I always thought that Christians were freaky. But you're actually kind of smart!" And from there a conversation started.

But the conversation that started between Courtney and her friend that day was a conversation that God had been hoping would happen from the day He seeded her life with the faith of her mother, a conversation God had been hoping would happen from the day Courtney decided to cultivate her faith and turn it into a personal commitment to Christ. And now in God's time and in His way the "faith that dwelt first in her mother" and now dwelt in her came to dwell in the heart of her classmate too. Because that's the way a sincere faith conversation is meant to work.

Let's pray ...