

Pastor Charley:

Well, welcome to worship here at Johns Creek United Methodist Church. We're so glad that you've joined us today. We appreciate you connecting with us in worship. It's always good to be together. Even though it's virtually, we are worshiping God together as Christ's followers, and it does feel good, and we do appreciate you taking time to do that. We hope this is a time of inspiration, of encouragement for you.

Let's be in an attitude of prayer together. Lord, we do thank you for this time, for your love and for your power. We give you thanks. For your wisdom and guidance we give you thanks. For your faithfulness during these difficult and challenging times, Lord, we give you thanks. And now, Lord, I give you thanks for giving me the amazing privilege and responsibility of preaching your word to these, my friends and your servants. Lord, a task that I need your strength in order to do. So Lord, speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

I enjoy getting to know religious dropouts. Let me explain. Quite often I come across people who are really disenchanted with faith. Their faith is really not working for them anymore, that maybe have grown up in the church their entire life, they've memorized scripture, they've been to Sunday school, they know the whole drill but they've gotten to a time in their life where their faith just doesn't have any power anymore. Sometimes they're college students who have somewhat of a crisis of faith. They've been to school, they've talked to professors, they're asking questions, they're a bit skeptical, and they wonder about this whole religion and faith thing if it's really true. Sometimes they're adults who've been through a major crisis in their life and they get to a place where they're really wondering if their faith is going to work for them. Sometimes these are people who grew up in fundamentalist homes and they want to get as far away from the church as possible.

I enjoy meeting people like that. And believe it or not, there are folks in this church, there are folks in this community who fit that description. In fact, I'm willing to bet that some of you listening to me either are in that place right now or you know someone who is. And I love meeting people like this. I love talking to them and you may wonder why. One of the big reasons why is because I agree with them quite often. I believe you don't have to check your brain at the door when it comes to faith. I believe that there's nothing wrong with doubt and questioning. I believe that the faith that we have is much deeper than the sound bites we hear on television or religious programming.

And quite often when I get into conversations with people like this and we really dig deep and we talk about faith and we ask the questions and we struggle together, they often come away from a conversation with me feeling liberated. And they say, "I never knew that faith could be like this. I never really understood the power of the faith like this." And even though they're acting like they're discovering something new, there really are. Most of the time, they're simply rediscovering the power of our faith, our genuine faith.

So let me ask you, do you feel like your faith is really not working for you in your life? Are you in the midst of great difficulty and you find that when you pray or when you focus on your faith, that it doesn't hold any power anymore? That it seems like it's road, it seems like you're going through the motions? It doesn't feel like it used to feel. Well today, I want to address that and talk about the power of our faith because there's a text in Revelation, believe it or not, where the writer of Revelation is addressing a particular congregation, a particular church in Ephesus that can relate to the people that I've just described. They were going through the motions. On the outside, it looked like they were doing everything right. They were saying the prayers, they had right belief, they were staying faithful. And yet God will look beyond their religiosity, beyond their orthodoxy, beyond their rules, beyond their rituals and try to get them back to the true power of their faith.

The text appears in Revelation chapter 2, and I begin reading at verse 2. "I know your deeds and your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people and that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary. Yet, says the Lord, I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love. You had it first."

I think many of us need to insert our names into that particular passage and hear God say to us, "I see your good works and I see your right belief and I see you do everything right on the outside, and yet I have this one thing against you. You have forgotten my love for you and you have forgotten your love for me. You have forgotten the power of my embrace. You have forgotten our love relationship and that everything flows out of that."

So is your faith not working for you anymore? Are you having a crisis of faith? Are you burned out in your faith? I want to call you back to the true power of our faith based upon this text. And that is the true power of our faith doesn't come from rules, it doesn't come from ritual. It doesn't come from right belief. It doesn't come from dogma or doctrine. It doesn't come from anything on the outside. It comes from our love relationship with God. And the power of that relationship, everything flows out of that.

And so I want to remind you of what this power of true faith can do for you because maybe you are in the midst of a difficult, challenging time and you're wondering, "Well, if this power of faith you're talking about that I've maybe lost or can't find again, Charley, what can it really do for me?" And I hope as I share with you in the next few minutes what this true love relationship with God can do for you, it'll call you back to your first love.

First of all, the true power of our faith, the true power of our love relationship with God can give us the power to change. The honest truth is, the change is predicated on relationship. The power of relationship gives us the power to change. The Bible says that God is changing us from glory to glory. You see, outside of God's embrace, we can't really make the changes that we want to make in our life. Maybe that's one of your struggles. You know you need to give up a habit, you know that you need to make some change in your life, you know you need to make a pivot or go in a different direction. And you find it so challenging and you need to hear that outside God's embrace, you will not be able to do that, but it's only inside God's embrace that you're able to make those changes in your life.

I recall when Brandy and I first got married, her parents were really into golf. And what I'm about to say, you may find very surprising, but it's the truth. When I married Brandy, in fact my whole life up until then and when I married Brandy, I hated golf. I couldn't stand golf. When in high school I would drive to school and use a shortcut with all my friends and we would drive through a golf course and I'd beep the horn as people were swinging. I couldn't stand it. Who plays golf? What a boring game. Who wants to spend four hours chasing a ball? And yet I knew my in-laws love golf and I knew Brandy wanted me to play golf with them to spend time with them. Well, I was dreading trying to do it. I mean, I love all kinds of sports and I have my whole life, but I really didn't want to do this. But I decided, "Okay, I'll try it."

And so the time came, I went to my in-laws house. The first thing I did, we were set up a time to go to the driving range at their country club. My father-in-law, he had all these tapes of Jack Nicholas and all these books that he wanted me to read and he had me do these drills before we went out. He didn't want me to go on the golf course yet. And so after reading all that stuff and seeing all those videos, I went to the range with my in-laws. Now, one of the things that I had learned was that when you hold a golf club, you're supposed to hold it lightly, not too tight. And I took that to heart. So I'm on the range and I'm hitting balls. And I finally get out a Big Bertha driver that belong to my father-in-law. Now, mind you, this is the Capital City Club, a very nice posh club. I had to borrow a collared shirt from my father-in-law in order to be able to get in.

So I'm hitting balls and I get out the driver and I said, "Okay, remember what Jack Nicholas said. Hold the grip lightly." And I took a big swing and I let go of the club and it helicoptered over my head, over the head of other golfers and landed in the lake straight up like a flag. And I am terribly embarrassed. My in-laws are clearly embarrassed. And then the pro, I kid you not, comes up to me and says, "Sir, you may want to hold onto the club a little tighter next time." And I thought, "Well, thank you so much, Sherlock." Well, you think after that experience I'd say, "Brandy, I can't do this." But I kept trying because I knew it meant a lot to her and it meant a lot to my in-laws. And so finally, we went out to play golf a couple days later. And after that round, I was hooked and then started my love affair with the game.

Now, if you had told me when I married Brandy that one day I'd become a passionate golfer, I would've laughed in your face. But I changed. And that change was made possible because of my love for Brandy and her parents. The love relationship I had provided the motivation and the power to change. And so often I forget that when it comes to my faith and I say to God, "God, this change you want me to make in my life, I can't do this. That's not who I am. This thing you're calling me to do, I can't possibly go there." And then God says, "Charlie, Charlie, come closer to me and my love for you and my embrace for you, and I'll give you the power to change."

It's the love relationship. 1st John 5:3 says this, "And this is the love of God that we keep his commandments and his commandments are not burdensome." Interesting verse. Why aren't the commandments of God burdensome? Because of our love relationship with God. Love has what we call a creative affinity, which means the more we love something, the more we become like that thing in which we love. So how are you doing with that one change in your life? What are you struggling with? Your first move is not to religion, is not to rules. Your first move is to God's heart. Your first move is to the cross. Your first move is to God's embrace. And God will give you the power to change. But the true power of faith not only gives us the power to change, it also gives us the power to forgive.

Forgiveness is not easy. All of us, if we're honest with ourselves, struggle with forgiveness. It's a process. Perhaps there are those of you who are watching me now who are struggling with estrangement from a loved one or struggling with resentment or bitterness of some kind and you say to yourself, "There's no way I can come to a place of forgiveness." And again, I'll say it's a process. It doesn't often happen overnight. But I'll tell you this, in my experience, the more I think about how God has forgiven me in Christ and the more I think about the times that God has loved me when I have been unlovable and when God has accepted me instead of abandoning me, when God has cleaned up my mess, the more I think about those times, the easier it is for me to forgive.

And think about your own life. Think about God has cleaned up your messes, how God has loved you when you have been unlovable and God has accepted you rather than abandoned you and God has embraced you rather than neglected you. Even at the worst times of your life when you think you didn't deserve it. Imagine how boundless God's love is. And if God's love is that boundless, our love for others should be boundless.

Her name was Sally Packard. She was 76 years old, lived in Minnesota. Sweet lady, strong faith, always going to church, always reading her Bible. One day her '89 Dodge was stolen. Wasn't much of a car, but it was hers. She would drive it to doctor's appointments. She would drive it to church, but it was stolen. She had a lot of precious things in that car when it was stolen. She had her favorite Bible in there. She had other literature. She waited for seven months to talk to this 17 year old kid who stole her car. And finally, seven months passed and the court date was set. Sally went to that court date to talk to that 17 year old. When she got up to speak and the judge gave her permission, this is what she said, this is what she began with. "When we forgive, we're not denying that something is wrong. We're not denying that something hurt, but we're simply acknowledging that there's more to the offender than the offense."

Well, needless to say, when she said that she had the attention of everybody in the court. She talked about how she used to be a foster mom for over 50 kids in her life. She said quite often what she learned with most of those children, that they were abused and they were neglected, they were thrown out by people and they hurt. And oftentimes, they lashed out and hurt people because she said, "Hurt people simply hurt people." And then she said to the judge, "And so Judge, I want to say this. I want that young man to know," and he was standing close to her, "I want him to know that I'm praying for him. It's not too late for him to make a fresh start. I want him to know that I care about him. A good life is awaiting him if he simply will get on the right path."

And then Sally did something interesting. She asked the judge for permission to give this young man two stones. One said hope on it, another said special prayer on it. She gave them these stones and said, "Son, I really care about you." And then something remarkable happened, they hugged right there in the courtroom. He hugged Sally tight and said, "I'm so sorry. I realize now I didn't just steal a car. I hurt a human being." Well, needless to say, there was not a dry eye in the courtroom. The judge who had been at this for a very, very long time said this, "I've been doing this many, many years and I have never seen a more powerful moment." And then she looked at the young man and said this, "You just happened to choose a victim that could change your life."

Later she was talking to a reporter and Sally said that she didn't make him pay restitution, she didn't press any charges. And she said to the reporter, "something special happened that day in the courtroom. I really don't know how to describe it. All I can say is that it was God." That's right. The power of the love of God gave Sally the ability to forgive and gave that young man the ability to change. Oh, come back to God's embrace, come back to God's love. It will give you the power to change. It will give you the power to forgive. But you know what you also need to hear? That will give you power over fear.

Now, I know that's a message that many of us need to hear right now. We are afraid. We are in the midst of very anxious times. We can't watch the news for five minutes without being scared into something or scared about something. We're anxious about COVID. We're anxious about the times in which we live. There's lots of fear. But one thing I know for sure that to be a Christian doesn't mean that we deny that there is fear. It doesn't mean we say we're never afraid. It simply means our faith is greater than our fear. That was true for David as he faced Goliath. Of course, David was afraid facing that giant, but he made his faith greater than his fear. It was true for Moses. As Moses led the people of God across the Red Sea, I know he was afraid. I'm sure he was afraid, but Moses made sure his faith was greater than his fear. And of course, it was true for Jesus Christ. As He faced the cross, "Not my will Lord, but yours be done." His faith was greater than His fear.

One of the great texts that reminds me of this is Romans 8. It's a text that I've gone back to over and over and over again as a Christian throughout my life, through good times and through bad times, through scary times, through anxious times. It gives one of the greatest promises of God and scripture. That no matter what we face, God will always be with us. And not only that, God can redeem our suffering. Romans 8 says, "For I'm convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord." And it says, "We are more than conquerors through him who first loved us." Because of God's love for us, we don't have to be afraid. Our faith can be greater than our fear.

Sue Monk Kidd is a writer. She talks about the time and she writes about the time when she was pregnant with her second child. During that pregnancy, of course, her first child, Bob, was three years old. Bob was afraid of the dark like many kids that age are. She tried everything to help him. She tried to put a nightlight in his room. She tried to keep the hall light on, but nothing would work. He was afraid of the dark when he went to sleep.

One night he cried out in the middle of the night terrified of the dark. And like Sue had done many times, she entered his room and held him and embraced him. During that moment that she embraced him and was slowly rocking him, he began to look at his mommy's tummy, her pregnant tummy and began to rub that tummy and he said, "Mommy, is it dark in there where my young brother is?" She said, "Yes, sweetheart. I'm sure it's definitely really dark." And he said, "Do you think he has a nightlight in there?"

"No," she said, "I'm sure there is no nightlight." And he said, "But Mom, do you think he's afraid?" And she said, "I don't believe so, son. You know why? Because he's not alone. You see, he's inside me. He's always with me." And then Sue said she had a stroke of inspiration and she said, "It's the same way with you, Bobby. You're really never alone because I always carry you with me. You are always right here in my heart." Well, Sue was wondering as she put him back to bed if he really got what she was saying. You never know if a three-year-old does. But that was the last night he ever cried out in fear of the dark.

And Sue would later write. "So often, I believe God was above me up there and out there. Then I learned slowly that God definitely was with me. And then I learned as I became a stronger Christian that oh my gosh, the spirit of the living Christ lives within me." And that's the truth. That's the power of our faith. The Bible says the Spirit, the same spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead lives in you, lives in me. The power of that love is always available. The power of that love is always within us. And therefore, it will always give us the power to change and the power to forgive and the power over fear. Get back to your first love. Get back to the love of God and his embrace. That's where the power of faith is found.

Let's pray. Lord, draw us back to you and your love and your embrace of us because we'll never make the changes we need to make. We'll never become whole human beings until we experience the power of your love that makes us whole. It can't come through external things. It can't come through intellectual ascent to a particular belief. It can only come through experiencing the power of your love and our relationship with you. Lord, draw us back to that. And may we find the power to change and the power to forgive and the power over our fear. It's in Christ's name, we pray. Amen.