

Thursday Theology: Reflections on “Faith” and on “Following Jesus”

Co-missioners,

Consider this word, the one we’ve been greeting you with for the past six years: “co-missioners.” As in “fellow participants in the great, ongoing mission of the baptized.” As in people to whom the Instigator of that mission was also speaking on the first night of Easter when he said to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Today we pass along reflections on two essential ingredients of that mission. One is “faith”—faith in God, to be sure; more pointedly, faith in the God we have in Christ Jesus, crucified and risen. The other is “following Jesus,” a phrase that fills the chatter of the American church these days to the point of becoming little more than a mantra, a thing we say without quite grasping why we say it or what exactly it signifies.

Neither of our writers will address their topics fully. Nor did either of them develop their thoughts specifically for Thursday Theology. As it happened, our editor stumbled across their work in other venues, spotted insights worth sharing, and secured their permission to share these here. Said editor, Jerry Burce, will introduce them in turn as you read further. Both will enrich your meditations this Lent.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

I. Robin Lütjohann on “Faith.” (A Devotion)

Robin is the pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He also teaches Confessions for the Lutheran contingent at Harvard Divinity School. Some weeks ago, he teamed up with a colleague, the Rev. Raphaela Mueller, to produce a series of daily devotions for the current season of Lent. Here is one, written by Robin, that appeared earlier this week. To call it meaty is an understatement. If, on reading it, you’re moved to subscribe to the rest of the series—daily email, delivered to your inbox—[send Robin a note](#). –JB

Hebrews 11:17-19—

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

There is no way to interpret the story of the almost-sacrifice of Isaac by his own father that doesn’t make us feel at least a little bit uncomfortable. I don’t want to try to clean that up. But I do want to lift up the point made by the author of the letter to the Hebrews: Faith in the promises of God can enable us to be fearless, no matter the trials we face.



The Sacrifice of Isaac – Juan de Valdés Leal (1622–1690)

[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

In chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews, we are told about a series of heroes in the Bible, who all have one thing in common: *faith*, which is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrew 11:1). Abraham, claims this author, trusted in two hoped-for / unseen things: (1) God’s promise that his son Isaac would be the beginning of a numerous lineage of descendants, and (2) God’s ability to raise the dead.

We often assume that Abraham was distressed and anxious as he grudgingly followed God’s command to sacrifice his son. Films and images usually depict the scene kind of like this: A grizzled old man silently ascends a mountain, followed by his

clueless son, with a dark cloud hanging over him. He makes a pyre, puts his son on it, and as he raises his knife, his hand shaking, finally God intervenes. He sighs a big sigh of relief that he did not have to perform the impossibly evil and horrifying deed God asked of him after all.

This makes for a dramatic scene. But it is not the picture painted by the author of Hebrews. Instead, here we have an Abraham who is so certain of the promise God made to Isaac and of God's life-giving power that nothing could possibly happen to his child. He knew, we are led to believe, that God would take care of him. God would come through.

The latter version may be less realistic or believable, or even appealing. But it opens an intriguing possibility: Could there be such a faith that is so certain of God's promise and faithfulness, that nothing could finally shake it? Could there be a faith so fully entrusted to God that it could whistle while ascending the mountain of doom? If this was true of Abraham, we can see why he is claimed as the "father" of Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. Such is an extraordinary faith!

My life is very different from Abraham's. But I do experience trials and testing on the daily. Nothing quite as dramatic as this, but real nonetheless. If I'm honest, I often fail the tests I face. And if I'm brutally honest, I sometimes fail these trials because my faith is weak and buckles in the face of resistance. When something triggers my anger, for instance, I give in to it rather than trusting God to take care of me through this aggravating situation. Or when I have to send a tricky email, I sometimes worry endlessly about how it will be received and anxiously await the reply on pins and needles. Rather than leaving the unseen future in God's hands, I give into the kind of worry Jesus warned about (Matthew 6), the kind that can rob your sleep and steal your peace. When money gets

difficult, I don't turn to prayer but instead become ungenerous and stingy. When my health is not good, I whine and complain, rather than asking God for healing and thanking God for the help of medical professionals. Time and time again, my faith is exposed for its weakness by the trials of my life.

But there is good news for those "of little faith" like myself. Even faith the size of a mustard seed can move a mountain (Matthew 17:20). Why is that? Because my little faith is anchored in the big faith of Abraham's most famous descendant: Jesus.

Unlike Isaac, there was no animal to take the place of Jesus at the last second. And unlike Abraham, God the Father did have to watch his son die an agonizing death. But by faith, Jesus endured the trials of his life for my sake. And by his Spirit, he has put his own faith in my heart.

If I can remember this and trust this, then maybe the next time I face a trial, I will do it not with my own shaky faith but with the faith of Abraham and Jesus.

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II. Chris Neumann on "Following Jesus" (A Sermon Fragment)

Chris, an occasional Thursday Theology contributor, is a gifted Law/Gospel thinker who was recently added as a lay preacher to his ELCA synod's pulpit supply list. In the recent Epiphany season, he preached on Mark's account of Jesus calling his first disciples. It includes the same phrase we heard in last week's Gospel for Lent 2—"follow me," as English translations insist on rendering it. I trust you'll be struck as I was by Chris's deft and forthright exposure of the problem inherent in the way the phrase is usually heard, and even more by how he points to Christ himself as the One who solves this problem for us. —JB

How this sermon on a text about fisherman begins (cf. Mark 1:16-20—

One of my all-time favorite pictures of my dad is of him standing with his brother as young boys, holding up a stringer of at least a dozen fish. The naughtiest looking grin is plastered on his face, like he just pulled a fast one and got away with something he had no business doing. As if inspired to give Martin Luther's 'sin boldly' encouragement a real shot...

Later, toward the end—



*Calling of Peter and Andrew – Duccio di Buoninsegna
(1255–1319)*

[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

... The fact remains that Jesus chose ordinary people like you and me for the most important project ever. He didn't sift through resumes, check references, or conduct interviews. How can Jesus be so confident while taking such a cavalier approach? If we've been paying attention [at church these past several weeks], we already have the answer. You'll recall John the Baptist in his "prepare the way" message: "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

As is always the case, Jesus delivers, at the same time providing an explanation to why he settles for run of the mill employees like those first disciple. Like you and me. The Holy Spirit, God's spirit, is already actively at work behind the scenes. And as for what the Spirit is doing, we jump back to where we left off in our catechism—remember?—the part about me being unable to come to Jesus. It picks up then with this: but instead, "the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with gifts, made me holy, and kept me in true faith."

The Holy Spirit is present and working in you today, the same way it was in that extraordinary capacity with those disciples way back when. All of us are equipped in our baptism with an otherwise impossible faith, blessed with different gifts, being used by God to gather more fish, whether we even realize this or not. Again, the Spirit is doing the heavy lifting. You are everything you'll ever need to be right this moment to be Jesus' disciple. Thanks be to God for that. For the gift of his Spirit and his putting it to use through you. To keep you following.

What exactly does that mean, huh, to follow? Personally, I often

drift into using the word synonymously with “imitate” or “copy.” Do we want to imitate Jesus? Well, of course. But this is the fish that I am starting to chew on the wrong bait again. For one, if we think of Jesus simply as a blueprint for the way to live life, we’re missing the point of him being in the flesh among us in the first place. A model of the Godly life, for sure. But oh, so much more.

Moreover, my attempts at imitating Christ are hopeless. It is something akin to the matching game “Simon.” The one where the computer flashes a red light and I mimic by pushing the red button. The computer then responds, flashes first red, and then blue. I again copy the sequence. On and on we go, back and forth, me replicating what I just saw. If you’re familiar with this game at all, you know this: it’s only a matter of time before you slip up. Sure, maybe you can duplicate five, ten, maybe even fifteen successive light patterns. But in no way whatsoever is keeping up with the pattern sustainable. You are bound to make a mistake. Same goes for “following” Jesus when we think about it in that context. If we’re lucky, we get a little bit right. But in no conceivable way do we keep it up. Despair and frustration are inevitable with that approach.

I learned this week that the direct Greek behind “follow me” literally means “Come—get behind me.” It’s same thing you’d say to me if you knew how to get to a destination and I didn’t. Follow me, you’d say. I know where I’m going.

And there’s the same thing Jesus is saying to us today. Follow me. I know where I’m going. I’ll lead. You follow. Follow me on this journey. Learn what I’m really all about. Follow me all the way to the foot of a cross. Watch me get nailed to it, and with me all of your embarrassment, pride and self-righteousness, along with the rest of the reasons you really don’t deserve to be [called a disciple]. Follow me and watch me die out of

unfailing love for you, the people I so desperately want on the team. Keep on following me and watch me live, so that when you have to die, you can be confident of being raised to new life too. Come along for that ride! Bring a friend. Get them hooked in this net of hope.

With that in mind, jump into this next week with a big, naughty grin like my dad's plastered on your face. Fact is, you did get away with something. I Suppose you can say that you got caught. This courtesy of the Holy Spirit. Sins forgiven. A bright, shiny future, though you don't deserve it. This on account of Jesus. Bite down hard on that bait and keep following along.

**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to
use**

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