

## SINCERE FAITH

2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

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A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson  
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The aim of nearly everything we do at Oxford Presbyterian Church is to nurture a sincere faith. There's nothing I want more as a minister than to see all of us develop a sincere faith in Jesus Christ. A sincere faith in Christ is the object of our Christian Education and Confirmation program. It's the goal of our new members orientation next Sunday. Churches don't need more names on a church register, nor does God. We need men and women who have a sincere faith in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul used the phrase "sincere faith" when he wrote to a young minister named Timothy. "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." We inherit many things from parents and grandparents but sincere faith is not one of them. Nevertheless we have a crucial role in nurturing a sincere faith in our children and grandchildren. Do you want your children and grandchildren to have a sincere faith in Jesus Christ? Is there anything more important? Education, health, athletics, music are important in the developing lives of healthy children. But what could be more important in the long run than a sincere faith in Jesus Christ. This morning I want to share with you my understanding of sincere faith based on what the Bible says. By remembering the word F.A.I.T.H. you'll remember this sermon. This is not a gimmick, it's an aid to help us remember what sincere faith is?

Let the "F" in FAITH stand for *focus*. A sincere faith *focuses* on the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul writes, "I know the one in whom I have put my trust." We all have faith in science, medicine, technology, and our nation's democratic institutions. But ultimately Christians nurture a sincere faith in Jesus Christ. Sincere Christian faith focuses on Jesus Christ. One of the

greatest novels I ever read is Dostoyevsky's, *The Brothers' Karamazov*. In one scene ~~one~~ Madame Hohlakov is filled with paralyzing doubts. "How can I have faith? How can I believe? How can faith in Christ be proved?" So he talks to a saintly monk, Father Zozimov. In affect he tells her, "Faith in Christ cannot be proved. There's no absolute certainty. But focus on Christ and you'll come to know the truth of who Jesus is. Focus on Christ and his love - how he healed the sick, welcomed sinners, reached out to include the excluded. Focus on Christ." Even if the Christian faith is an illusion none of us will go wrong if we focus on Christ.

Let the "A" in FAITH stand for *alive*. A sincere faith is alive. Someone has said, "Tradition is the *living faith* of the dead; traditionalism is the *dead faith* of the living." Dead faith believes God exists and does nothing. But a sincere faith is alive and one sure sign of life is action. A living faith is active, not passive. Acting in faith is like riding a bicycle. Remember when you learned to ride a bicycle? One of the first things you discover is that you can't ride unless you risk action. If you just try to sit passively on a bicycle you fall-over. You have to move. You have to pedal. You may wobble. You may fall. You may skin your knees and bruise your head. But you'll never learn to ride unless you take action. A sincere faith in Christ is like riding a two wheel bicycle; it's alive. <sup>And action is the sign of life.</sup> ~~A sincere faith is alive.~~ It worships regularly, prays daily, and studies and volunteers routinely. Faith won't get you anyplace unless it's alive and active.

Let the "I" in FAITH stand for *inquiring*. A sincere faith is an inquiring faith. It asks questions. We've all seen signs that say *Inquire Within?* Well, we should have signs plastered all over the church, "Inquire within." Too often people think that faith means *No Inquiries*. "Simply believe and don't ask any questions!" Now faith in Christ can't be proved, but that's not to say it's blind and should never ask questions. A sincere faith inquires. The sincere faith of the Psalmist led him to inquire: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" Does your faith

suppress questions? For example, is it possible to believe in evolution and still believe God created everything? Well, let's inquire! Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Let's inquire! Is faith in God just wishful thinking as Freud proclaimed? Let's inquire! When we inquire, we grow in sincere faith. Beware of a faith that never inquires and accepts everything without question. That's a dangerous faith. I'm glad our denomination encourages tough questions about morality and ethics. That's a strength, not a weakness. It's a sign of sincere faith. Sincere faith is an ever inquiring faith.

Let the "T" in FAITH stand for *tested*. When tested a sincere faith endures. Nicholas Wolterstorff teaches at Yale Divinity School. He teaches faith to others. But his son was killed in a mountain climbing accident. His faith was severely tested. In writing about his grief he said, "My life has been divided into before and after. Never again will anyone inhabit the world the way he did. Only a hole remains, a void, a gap. My son is gone. The ache of the loss sinks down and down, deep beyond all telling." When Wolterstorff comes to the story of Christ's resurrection he now struggles to believe. He has his doubts. His faith has been tried and tested. But he chooses to keep worshipping with the family of faith because he refuses to let death have the last word. A sincere faith won't be destroyed <sup>when</sup> tested by tragedy and loss.

The "H" in FAITH stands for *honest*. A sincere faith is honest. The English word *sincere* comes from two Latin words meaning "without wax." In the ancient world a dishonest potter could use melted wax to glue together a broken pot. Then he'd paint and sell it as new. But when a person poured hot soup into the pot the wax melted and the pot would fall apart. So honest potters advertised their pottery as *sine cere*, "without wax". Sincere faith is honest. When we have a sincere faith we don't have to pretend we believe more than we do. We don't

need to pretend to be morally better than we really are. A sincere faith doesn't pretend to have all the answers. A sincere faith is honest.

Do you have a sincere faith? Many of us struggle daily with faith issues. You may even wonder if your mustard seed faith qualifies you to be a Christian. But the important thing is not how much faith you have or how you feel or even what you believe. Ask yourself these questions.

1. Is my faith, however weak, *focused on Christ*.
2. Is my faith, however orthodox, *alive*?
3. Do I have an *inquiring* faith that asks questions and seeks answers?
4. When *tested* have I have found it impossible to stop having faith in Christ?
5. Do I have an *honest* faith that doesn't try to impress others with how orthodox, holy and strong I am when, in fact, I know myself to be a weak struggling sinner.

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Parents and grandparents - will your children and grandchildren have sincere faith? Will you do all you possibly can to nurture faith in your children through word and action? May God's grace grab all of us in the deepest depths of our lives and not let us go until we all have a sincere faith focused on Christ, alive and active, inquiring, tested and honest. Do not be satisfied until you have a sincere faith in Jesus Christ. The aim of nearly everything we do at Oxford Presbyterian Church is to nurture a sincere faith.