



## **"Awakening to Love Beyond Belief"**

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

*Acts 22:1-21*

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Have you ever thought you lost your faith? Have you ever lost your faith? As a pastor I have spoken to many people. People come to talk to me and they have said, at least they thought, that at one point in their life they lost their faith. Many of these same people say their faith came back to them later on. If we haven't lost our faith, perhaps you know someone who has, someone in your family, maybe a child even or your extended family? Perhaps they lost their faith in college or because they had some sort of tragedy in their life that they just could not explain. Perhaps their faith just slowly ever so unnoticeably slipped away.

What I have discovered is that when people say they have lost their faith, they are actually saying that they have lost their interest or desire to believe in certain things anymore than the use to –they have lost their interest or desire to believe in certain things, things they used to believe but do not anymore. Their religious beliefs no longer make sense to them or fit into their new understanding of things. Many people keep this quietly to themselves, going about their business, but they know that the things they learned in Sunday school somehow do not really fit in to what they really think the world is like.

Well we don't have to think about this too much, there are examples all around. For example, one time a high school/college student who had been very much a leader in our youth program at my church in Flint, Michigan, went to college and came back after their freshman year and he said to me, "I lost my faith." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, I can no longer believe that God created everything in six days. I can no longer believe that Jesus was born of a virgin." He continued to tick through these things that the church had taught him. I said to him, "Well this doesn't mean that you've lost your faith. What this means is that you have not yet integrated your new knowledge into your faith. You are just now discovering what faith actually is."

Friends, faith is different from what we believe. While what we believe often helps our faith, it does not define one hundred percent our faith. In a sense you might say that beliefs try to see things twenty-twenty, to have everything perfectly nailed down, whereas faith is totally blind and trusts, even without sight. The aim of our sermon today will be to springboard off of Paul's conversion story so to gain insight about the important differences between belief and faith.

Let's take a moment to be quiet together and ask the Spirit of God to minister to us so that each of us can hear what needs to be heard for our mutual benefit. I invite you to close your eyes and ask God, the Spirit, in the silence that we would become co-learners

this morning. When we close our eyes half the world goes away and we discover how powerful and inescapable these thoughts are, but we wish to be in these body temples feeling our hearts, receiving the rest that comes from trusting God and letting go of our control of things. Spirit of God help us today as we study together. Amen.

That was nice, this little moment. I know some of you think I'm totally weird. I've two points this morning.

### **The first is that belief is different from faith.**

Did you notice in the scripture reading today, and really, we should probably read it again to hear the intensity of what Paul is saying there. But that Paul was arrested because of what he believed and what he was preaching. In this story that we heard read, he was defending himself in a religious trial and in this defensive he is telling a personal story about his own conversion experience. Notice also how Paul who was originally named Saul, but after his conversion experience was given his new name Paul, like so many transforming moments of individual lives in the Bible when there was a decisive transition from one way of being to another – it often was accompanied by a change in name. Just think of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah.

Paul was using, so he says, his religious beliefs to go around Palestine doing violence in the name of the authorities of Jerusalem and the Holy High Command of Israel and the Temple. Paul beat people. He hunted them down. He persecuted them. He did violence to them. He abused them. His beliefs he says, even justified him watching over as someone was killed with total self-righteousness, because these people did not believe what he believed and sadly this has so often been the case throughout Christian history. Violence has been done in the name of defending what I believe and what this church believes to others who believe differently. God have mercy.

Just last week we were riveted I suspect to the television as we saw a Christian, so called, defend the white people of Norway from the Muslims, killing people to make a point. God have mercy.

This dysfunctional use of belief is one of the underbelly side of beliefs. It is not to say that there are also wonderful things about beliefs, one of which was The Apostles' Creed we just said. Beliefs tie communities together in very important ways. So, please here me, beliefs are not the enemy, but they can be used very dysfunctionally.

Paul then goes on to describe that he had the credentials to do this. He had a PhD from the Harvard of this day in theology. He was given the highest titles possible in the land, Pharisee of the Pharisee. He thought he was right and even worse, he needed to make others wrong. His beliefs were very important to him and he defended them against any perceived threat. This is very common.

Like many religious people, Saul had very strong beliefs, but very weak faith. I'll say that again, like many religious people, Saul had very strong religious beliefs, but very weak faith. You see belief is something that happens to us early on. We are formed by our culture, community and families and it is very evidence based. It gives us a great sense of security when we know certain, when I believe these things. However, in my

own experience and as I have studied the developmental psychologists, I have discovered that strong beliefs often are associated with the more immature ages of adolescences and teenagers. In fact, there was never a time I was more zealous than after my conversion experience when I was 17 years old. For two or three years, I left a trail of destruction of friends because I needed to make them wrong and convert them to Jesus. I hurt people in my zealotry. This need to be right and this need to communicate these beliefs at all costs, cost me a lot, I think.

What we discover, and I know some of you have discovered this, is that as we age and mature we begin to let go of our demand for security and control through our beliefs and we recognize the mystery of life and the necessity of faith. People may appear very liberal because they don't want to define themselves with a belief, but actually they are quite safe in Christ, because their trust in God with total blind faith. It is an interesting thing to be human and to feel the mystery between belief and faith.

I know this from personal experience myself, and I tell the story of my experience in my book, *The God Who Is Here*. This is a miracle that this has been published. I'm so grateful. I won't go into all the details of my story. You can read about it in the book, at least most of the details. In my experience I was like Saul. I was a Pharisee of Pharisees. I went to Moody Bible Institute which is the WestPoint Academy of American Religion. I was the student body president. I started a homeless ministry which continues today. I was very zealous. I would go out to coffee shops and start conversations with people. I was filled up with Francis Shaeffer and the ideas of Apologetics and tried to defend my faith to them and convert them to Christianity. I would go out on the streets sometimes and although I felt this deep twinge of discomfort, I would do my street evangelism. But, during my four years at Moody, I began to recognize a dissonance within myself, that this idolatry of the Bible, this demand for certainty and security was doing something to me that I didn't particularly like. It was turning me into a mean person.

Now, those were the rumblings that something didn't square right. I wanted to go into the ministry and so I went to seminary. I went to Princeton Seminary – the best seminary in the world I think. Princeton University is an amazing campus, beautiful place, old beautiful academic buildings. During my first year there, I began to realize that what I believed when I walked across the street to the campus of the university wasn't accepted for the most part. I began to feel deeply insecure and I asked myself how am I going to make a living in this real world where we across the street are in our make belief world of beliefs? I had a crisis of faith. I'm so grateful for that experience. For a time I even became an atheist, because I couldn't intellectually square the things I knew about academically and intellectually with the things I had always been told to believe.

Now, many people at that point lose their faith. They give up. But thanks to God I did not give up – I hit bottom. It took some time, but my bottom happened when I was 33 years old. I had been in the ministry as an associate pastor for about 5 years. I had gone through a divorce and a broken engagement all within a two-year period. I began to see I was the common denominator. All this knowledge I had, I had somehow forgotten – the personal touch of God's love and that my struggle to make the circle of faith square of certain scientific truth was ruining me and I couldn't do it. I was very

comforted to begin this process of breaking down. You see because I needed to have a deconstruction to be rebuilt and sometimes we have to be broken down to come back to life. Some people talk about as a second naiveté or Jesus said, be like a child and enter the kingdom of God.

My experience hitting bottom included the ministry of a person who came into my life at just the right time and held me while I grew. I didn't know how to go on. I tell about this story in my book. Her name is Deanine and she ministered to me with a quality and presence of love that had never to that point experienced in all my life and all my exposure to Christianity. I have never known someone who had such brilliance of love and such a deep understanding of the ministry of Jesus Christ. She and I met randomly when I was on a spiritual retreat in the Teton Mountains. She was my waitress. She was a lesbian woman who had dropped out of seminary, but knew Christ in a way I could not even imagine. She ministered to me the love of God and it blew all my categories away of what was right and what was good, but I knew that she had something that I desperately wanted and needed. The person you know today is in large measure here because of Deanine's ministry to me. She was the presence of Christ to me.

It is the presence of Jesus Christ that makes all the difference. That was the case for Saul. It was his encounter with the resurrected Jesus Christ. Now, I have never seen Jesus Christ. I have never seen the resurrected Jesus Christ. He has never appeared to me. But, the love and presence of Christ by the Spirit has appeared to me through many people in various circumstances along the course of my journey. It is not to say that the resurrected Jesus Christ won't appear to you. He obviously chose to appear to Saul. Saul didn't see Him, he just heard Him – it was too blinding of a light. But it was this personal encounter with the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ that changed his life and helped him be reconstructed after his falling apart if you will and moved away from the demand for his beliefs into the experience of faith in Jesus Christ – the very reason he was killing people - he began to experience himself.

Friends, faith is very, very important. Beliefs are very, very important. But there is something that is even more important, there is something that is beyond faith and that is love. Now, just remember that this guy, Saul, who was abusing people, tracking people down and killing them; after his experience of Christ and many years later from this conversion he has a deep understanding that is grounded in faith, that propels him through the meditating world, facing great stress in difficult circumstances and inspires him to pen these most profound words, you will recognize them.

**And now faith, hope and love abide and the greatest of these is love.**

It is the presence of love is the greatest indicator of the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit. We, my friends, are in an evolutionary moment where we can begin to experience the love of Christ, the recognition that churches have been playing church and avoiding the love of God is profound. When we begin to feel the reality of God, the God who is love, we are invited personally to move from beliefs to faith to love – it is a journey of transformation. Now as we close our time, I remind you of our aim, the aim for our sermon today was to springboard off of Paul's conversion story to gain insights about the important difference between belief and faith.

**Belief says:** I believe that Jesus said, "If you say to the mountain move it will." I believe that Jesus said that. I believe the Bible.

**Faith says:** "Move!" The quality of difference between moving from the head to the heart to our very temple body is an invitation to the Christian life.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and Word was God and the Word became flesh. We of all people, the Christians, should celebrate what it means to be a physical body, to recognize that we're not just our head, but Christianity was not created to be the queen of the scientific prom or the king of all ideas. Christianity is a religion for foot washers and servants, the meek and the humble. Christianity is not to be the powerbroker of the kingdom of this world. Christianity is meant to be the servant of love in a school of love that we call planet Earth.

If you are interested, follow Jesus. He is closer than close. The Gospels remind us repeatedly that there are Pharisees among us, right in here – there are Pharisees in me. They are very powerful, they want to be in charge, but there is also the leper, the prostitute, the blind man, the centurion who just wanted his son to be healed and they know what faith is. Yes, Lord even the dogs pick up the crumbs on the floor.

*If I can just reach out and touch the hem of His cloak I will be healed – that is faith.*

*Let us pray.*

*Lord, you have heard what I have to say. I invited you in this silence to seal in your heart what the Spirit is saying to you. Make it an aim this week to love someone who you disagree with, to forgive someone who has wronged you, to do something without any certainty of its outcome. Amen.*