

Faith + Love = Hope

Acts 4.5-12; 1 John 3.16-end; John 10.11-18

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After this sermon we will together recite the Nicene Creed. Thereby we express the faith of all Christians throughout the ages and world-wide.

In this time of the year, after the celebration of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we remind ourselves of that age old and yet so relevant faith.

But we m one to the celebration of Pentecost, and we also hunger for the experience of the presence of God through His Holy Spirit in our lives.

How can we be be people of hope? How can we be assured of the saving presence of God in our life? How can we know for sure that He through His Spirit lives in us?

I suggest a mathematical equation:

Faith plus Love equals Hope. If you have the faith of the church, and the love of Christ, your are entitled to hope.

The different readings from the Holy Scriptures today, seem to underline this equation. The sum of faith and love is the assurance of God’s saving presence in our lives.

This is summed up well bij the apostle John in his first letter, chapter 3 verses 23-24:

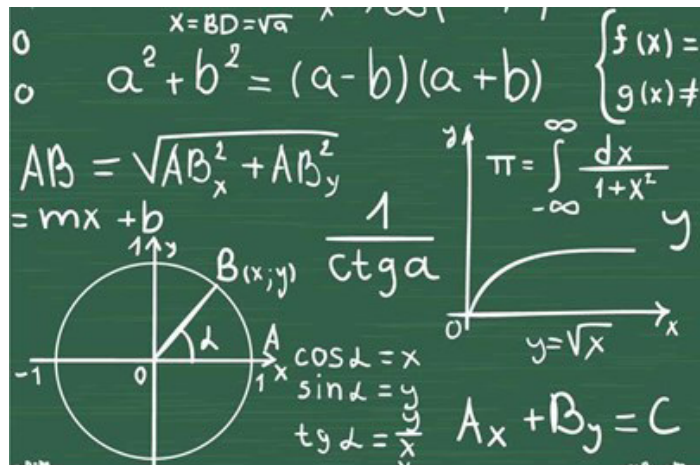
And this is his commandment, one: that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and two: that we love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments - these two commandments, they abide in him, and he abides in them.” (1 John .23-24)

So the preconditions for absolute certainty that God lives in us and that we are safely hidden in him, the ground of our hope, is that we have the right faith and the right love.

1. PRECONDITION: faith

The first precondition that John mentions, is that “that we should believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus Christ.”

Peter also spoke about this, just weeks after the first Pentecost. Together with John he had been arrested when they made a lame man walk in the name of Jesus Christ.



After a night in prison they were brought before the top Jewish leaders, and Peter told them that it was the Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom they had crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. He made this lame man walk.

‘You have rejected Him, but God had chosen Him to be the cornerstone of God’s work of salvation.’ And, said Peter,

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.

That is the faith of the church. We can never stop talking about Jesus. Peter, by the way, specifically called him ‘Jesus Christ of Nazareth.’ He was not speaking of a mythological imaginary Son of God, but of the historical person who came from Nazareth. Jesus had an address.

Our faith is not a made-up story. It is based on historical realities.

Jesus said of himself: ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.’

Even before He died Jesus predicted his death, but this was a choice. Things did not just happen to Him. He laid down his life. And He did this for us, for the sheep. This is our Lord. This is our faith.

Jesus underlined that it was his own decision to serve us, to save us, in this manner:

No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.

John, who was present at Jesus’ death and resurrection, says that it was the love of God and the love of Christ which made Him do this: ‘We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.’

The death of Jesus for us, his selfless act for our salvation, is the definition of what true love is. Love is giving yourself for the other.

And this brings John to the second precondition for our assurance that God is with us and that we are with God.

Only faith is not enough.

2. PRECONDITION: love

‘Love one another, just as he has commanded us,’ John writes in his letter. And he defines what love means. He says, ‘we ought to lay down our lives for one another.’

Jesus loved us and laid down his life for us. This we believe. But our necessary action then, is that we love each other and that we lay down our life for each other. That is the second precondition that John gives us. Love.



But this is expensive love. This is not just an emotion, it is not a fleeting feeling. It is extremely costly and John defines it by actions. Feelings come and go. A commitment to action is what is asked from us.

John asks the rhetorical question,

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

In the time after Easter, the early church was in a pressure cooker. They were treated badly, and the temptation was always there to just believe in Jesus in your heart, but to not show your true colours.

John makes clear that a cerebral faith, just something for the individual inside, is not enough. Because our Lord Jesus Christ did not come for a mental turnaround, but for the turnaround of our lives and for the creation of a new community - a new people of God.

And in all times and in all circumstances, the people of God support each other. We believe in Jesus who gave himself for us, and therefore we give ourselves to one another.

We take care of each other. Practical and tangible. Not with kind words only - though often enough we need those - but also by the most practical ways you can think of. Many Christians need you help. Your hand. Your support.



True faith is translated into action.

But I have noticed that it is also easy to take a lot of Christian action, while faith is lacking.

When I see many NGO and their charitable goals, helping children, helping refugees, collecting money for baby elephants or for widows, it often seems the good thing to do, but it can also be a cover up for the fact that our faith is feeble.

It is easy for Christians to escape into activism, to manage our feelings of guilt maybe, for our lack of faith.

We do need both - faith and action. True faith can only but result in true love for others. True love, translated into action, needs faith in our Lord Jesus.

Those two, faith in Him and love for others, together they equal assurance.

3. RESULT: hope - the assurance of God's proximity

'By this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him', says John. We believe in Him and we love His other children.



Those are the signs of God's presence in our life.
Faith and love. They reassure our hearts before God.

We belong to Him. He is our shepherd. With David
we rejoice:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me.

That is our hope.

But... so often our faith is so weak and our actions so lousy! Mathematical equations
notwithstanding, it is so easy to doubt. Just look at us.

Look at us!

John expected this response from his readers and from us. It is normal.

That is why John writes: 'whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our
hearts, and he knows everything.'

Even when in your heart you feel such a failure as a Christian - not enough faith, not
enough love - then so what.

It does not change your standing with God because God is greater than your heart.
His love and kindness for you is so much larger, so overwhelmingly abundant, that it
makes your lack of faith and your lack of perfect love so irrelevant.

That is exactly why Christ died for us. Because we are not good enough to save
ourselves.

And the fact that you feel so inadequate is really a sign that God is at work in your
life. His Spirit is at work in you, to strengthen your faith and to enlarge your love for
others. He is always at work. And never ready.

Conclusion

So even when your heart condemns you, laugh about your heart. God is so much
greater. Your mustard seed faith and your feeble love are God at work in you.

People outside the realm of God do not worry about their lack of faith and love.
People who have come to know God are always aware of their lack of perfection.

But so what. The faith in you and the love in you are God-given. They ensure you
that you can be a person of hope. God is your Father. He cares for you until you are
taken up in His eternal dwellings.

The Lord is my shepherd;
therefore can I lack nothing.
Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Amen.