

Everyone here has faith. It's nothing to brag about, and you don't have to be religious to have faith. Faith is God's gift to every human being, just as love and hope are God's gifts to every human being. You can damage your gift of faith, just as you can damage your hearing by standing too near a roaring jet engine. But everyone here has faith, and you will use it all through your life. Here are some examples.

Faith in Action

Several weeks ago, our five- and six-year old granddaughters were part of the worship service. Children filled an entire row. At the right time they filed out to go to their class. The older sister was first in line, the younger was last in line. How did that happen? They got to the end of the aisle, and the older sister stepped aside from being first in line to wait for her younger sister. That's loyalty, and loyalty is central to faith.

Two years ago, Lt. Cmdr. Eric Greitin, a former Navy SEAL, wrote an article for the Wall Street Journal about Navy SEAL training. He wrote vividly about what SEALs call "Hell Week." One of the easier exercises is for two buddies to work together. One ties the other guy's hands behind his back and ties his legs at the ankles. With knots tight the man is pushed into the water and has to swim 50 meters under water. If he can't do it, he can't be a SEAL. If the knots come undone, both men are dismissed from training.

According to Greitin, the guys in his class who survived "Hell Week" "had the ability step outside of their own pain, put aside their own fear and ask: 'How can I help the guy next to me?'" (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703992704576307021339210488.html>) That's loyalty, and loyalty is central to faith.

Many years ago in Dallas, the speaker in a hotel ballroom peppered his after dinner talk by using the name of Jesus Christ profanely. In the audience that night was a Christian man who finally had enough. He stood up on his chair and said to the speaker, "Sir, keep Jesus Christ out of it." That's loyalty to Christ, and loyalty is central to faith.

Here's another example of loyalty from the Bible. The Apostle Paul, who sacrificed career, social status, and ultimately his life, put it all in perspective when he wrote this: **I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.** (Philippians 3:8) That's loyalty to Christ, and loyalty is central to faith.

I know we don't usually put faith and loyalty together. Christians use a word like faithful and never think about loyalty. Non-religious people use a word like loyalty and never think about faith. I'm just trying to drive two ideas back together where they belong in your mind. It will help you to see the world more clearly and experience life more fully.

Sources of Loyalty

But there is more to faith than loyalty. Where does loyalty come from? Certainly, there is mystery here. Some people who don't seem loyal turn out to be the most loyal of all, and others who seem to be people you can count on disappoint you. It's hard to figure out some times.

But we know where loyalty comes from. It comes from what you believe is true. Take our granddaughters for example. The older sister gave up first place in line to wait for her

younger sister, because she believed it was the right thing to do. That's what families do. Of course, she might have done it for other reasons; but she had a reason, and she believed it was true. That's where her loyalty came from.

Only 21 men out of 210 in Eric Greiten's class completed the training and became Navy SEALs. Why did those 21 "step outside of their own pain, put aside their own fear and ask: 'How can I help the guy next to me?'" Maybe it was because they believed, like my granddaughter, that it was the right thing to do. Maybe it was because they believed that serving their country as a SEAL was the loftiest goal in their lives. Maybe it was because they believed it was better to die trying than to quit.

We can't always tell why people act as they do. But people usually act, because they believe something is true. Loyalty and convictions about what is true blend together the unique chemistry we call faith. That's how God made you, and that basic human experience brings us to consider specifically Christian faith.

The man who stood on his chair and called out the public speaker for his blasphemous use of the name of Christ and the apostle who said good-bye to reputation, career, wealth, and safety to serve Christ did so because of specific convictions they had about Jesus Christ. What are those convictions?

The first conviction that inspires loyalty to Christ is what today is all about. Christ the Lord is alive again forevermore in an indestructible body! That gave hope to a world where death seemed to have the last word. The Bible says that what happened to Jesus on the first Easter will happen to us: **in Christ all will be made alive.** (1 Corinthians 15:22) The Bible goes on to say this: **in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet . . . the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.** (1 Corinthians 15:52) That hope inspires deep loyalty to Christ.

The resurrection of Christ also forces us to reevaluate everything else in life. For example, the first Christians did not see the crucifixion of Christ as a tragedy or a travesty of justice. They saw it as the wisest and most powerful thing God ever did, because the death of Jesus is how God defeated evil and will convert the world.

The source of the Church's real influence in the world is not money or power but bearing faithful witness even to the point of death. The Bible says of the first Christians, **They overcame him** (the devil) . . . **by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.** (Revelation 12:11)

The revolution of Jesus Christ is a revolution of martyrs. The very helplessness of martyrs releases the wisdom and power of God to transform the world. People who believe that gladly give their loyalty to Jesus Christ.

A third conviction inspires loyalty to Christ. It is the belief that we are living in the last days. Hebrews 1:1-2 says: **In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.** The last days began with Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote this: **There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive . . . ungrateful . . . unforgiving . . . brutal . . . treacherous, rash . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.** (2 Timothy 3:1-4)

But also in the last days, God **raised him** (Christ) **from the dead and . . . placed all**

things under his feet. (Ephesians 1:20-22) **God exalted him to the highest place, and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.** (Philippians 2:9-11)

We are living in the last days. The last days are not about a date on the calendar. That's foolishness. They are about the decisive conflict for the heart and soul of nations. The last days are the times when Jesus is patiently exerting His authority to govern the nations, and His authority is being contested in every way imaginable.

Men and women of faith, who are caught up in this decisive conflict, stand for something. What they stand for is their core. They are willing to declare publicly what they stand for, and their ultimate loyalty is to Jesus Christ. Their loyalty to Him and the foundations on which that loyalty is built stacks up well against beliefs and values that contradict it. People loyal to Christ are **no longer . . . infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.** (Ephesians 4:14)

Getting Personal

Dr. Lou Rafetto of this church tells the story of an interesting experience that he and his 17-year-old son, Austin, had recently. They participated in something called "Extraordinary Golf." It had to do with improving your golf game, but at another level it had to do with rethinking possibilities in a person's life.

Only a few people went to the meeting, so it was easier for people to talk about why they were there. One woman told this story. She grew up in a family that played golf. Her mom and dad played all the time. Her brother played. They all wanted her to play, but she refused. She didn't like it and didn't want to play. They got her to drive their golf cart, hoping their enthusiasm for the game would rub off on her. Didn't happen. She left home and left golf far behind. Until she joined up for "Extraordinary Golf." And she said, "You know, it's a great game after all, and I'm so glad I did this."

When Dr. Rafetto told that story he said, "Isn't that a lot like people who grow in a Christian home? Their parents want them to have the same faith and experiences they had; and their children refuse. Then, later in life something changes, and they say, 'You know, it's not what I thought it was when I was young. It makes sense now.'"

Children refuse the faith of their parents for many reasons. If you know what I'm talking about, you'll know the reasons you gave. Maybe today is the day you take another look at what you once refused. I hope you will. The greatest statement of the meaning of Christianity goes like this: **God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.** (John 3:16) Everyone here has faith, and you will use it all through your life in many ways. Don't miss the big one! You were made for loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Loyalty to Christ begins by saying a clear, public YES to Christ, but that clear, public YES to Christ starts in your soul, out of sight. It can show up in many ways. It goes public when you get baptized. It goes public when you are tempted to step away from Christ and you remain loyal to Him; that gives you a taste of suffering for Christ. It goes public when you take the vows

of Christian marriage and when you join a church. It goes public in some people when they become pastors, missionaries, or martyrs.

It could go public right now. The congregation is going to sing a beautiful song together. While we sing, if you would like to say a clear, public YES to Christ, walk here to the front of the sanctuary and pray with some friends who will be here to pray with you. Robert, whose story of faith moved us all, will be here to pray with you. Just come!