

**X-Pressin' Faith by Sharon Hammill**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, August 17, 2008**

If you look at the sermon title for this morning, you might say we have a misspelling...but, this was the theme for this week's Music Camp – X-pressin' Faith. Let me just say, this was my first music camp and it was quite an experience. I am totally amazed at these children and youth and their abilities and enthusiasm as they truly expressed their faith this week. We had five-year-olds playing chimes for the first time. Eight and nine year olds played bells for the first time in a group. The youth met new challenges with more difficult pieces for the festival this fall...and all of them doing these new adventures with such faith and determination! This doesn't even count the other experiences with dance, choir, drama and art! X-pressin' faith through the arts is truly a blessing that these young people have shared and will share with us today.

How does this theme of expressing faith tie into our scriptures for today? What does "faith" mean? I looked online to get some definitions of faith and I found the following: Merriam-Webster says that faith is (1) belief and trust in and loyalty to God (2) belief in traditional doctrines of religion (3) firm belief in something for which there is no proof (4) complete trust. I think the most thought provoking definition I found was that of Martin Luther. Martin Luther says, according to a translation by Rev. Robert Smith, the "...faith is God's work in us, that changes us and gives us new birth from God (John 1:13). It kills the Old Adam and makes us completely different people. It changes our thoughts, our spirits and our powers" (Smith, 1). Luther goes on to say, "Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God's grace makes you happy, joyful, and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. Ask God to work faith in you, or you will remain forever without faith, no matter what you wish, say or do" (Smith, 1).

Our scriptures today are really two stories of faith that play out in different ways. Our scriptures in Genesis, finds out story of Joseph, you know that special child of Jacob, who was thrown into a pit, left for dead by his brothers, and suddenly reappears to his brothers in Egypt where he has been made a leader. The brothers are there trying to get food and are really dumbfounded to find their brother alive, but are also ashamed by what they have done and are afraid of what Joseph might do to them. This becomes a real story of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Joseph forgives them, wants them to let his father know he is alive, and tells them to bring his father to him. Joseph had to wonder all those years away from his family if he would ever see his father or brothers again. Faith saw him through and he was able to reconcile and once again be united with family. Faith played a part – he had to have faith to survive, to be thrust into a role in Egypt where he was a foreigner, and to believe that someday he would be reunited with his father and siblings.

Our second scripture is a unique story of faith. Our story finds Jesus, who has just had a confrontation with the Pharises over eating rituals. He says it's not what you put in the mouth but what comes out of the mouth that counts. He is getting away from it all, you might say. He and the disciples are travelling to Tyre and Sidon, what is now the modern day Lebanon. This is only one of two times that the Bible says that Jesus travelled outside of Israel. He and the disciples are walking along and suddenly this Canaanite woman appears to them begging Jesus to help her daughter. The disciples are annoyed by her persistence and ask Jesus to help. He makes a really offhand remark when he replies that he is only here to "help the lost sheep of Israel." Now if you have studied much of Matthew, you know that Matthew's goal is to get the Jewish people to

realized it's not about their laws, but about inheriting the Kingdom of God. This scripture, however, takes Jesus out of Israel and now he is confronted with the woman who believe He can help her daughter, but his reply to her is not all that nice. He says he can't take the food from the children and feed it to the dogs. He refers to the Canaanites as "dogs." He can't take what is for Israel and give it to the Canaanites. But you have to be amused that she comes back with a reply to that comment when she says that even masters give their dogs scraps from the table. This woman is persistent! She displays faith. She expresses her faith in Jesus' healing power and persists until he says, "Your faith is something else! You will get what you want." Her persistence paid off, her faith that Jesus could heal her daughter worked...it happened.

These are two great stories in our scripture lessons today. We each have our own ways of expressing faith in God. It may be through our actions, through our stories, or we may express faith through prayers or by sharing our gifts and talents in various ways as our young people have done today. Whatever way we choose to express that faith, we must be consistent, sometimes persistent, but always joyful in the new creature we are in God. As with Joseph, we need to realize that faith is not always easy. God has a plan that is now always perfect, you suffer the good with the bad, the uncomfortable with the comfortable, but faith, that complete trust in God, that God will get you through. As with the Canaanite woman, we have to be persistent, we just keep asking even though we might now always get the answer we want, God will provide. We need to recognize that our faith journeys may to always have happy endings every time, but God is in control.

Valerie Tutson, a well-known storyteller and one of the participants at the National Youth Event, writes "My Scottish grandmother, Ruth Elizabeth Rankin, shared with me a lesson from her mother, Anna McArthur. She said, 'If you want to know a people, you must know the stories they tell'" (Tutson, vii). At the National Youth Event in Knoxville a few weeks ago, we heard many stories of faith along the way, both from the Bible and from real people. We heard the faith story of Kathleen Stuck, who was born into the Pechanga Indian tribe in California to a drug-addicted mother. After many years in a foster home, she finally was adopted to a loving family in Brentford, South Dakota. Kathleen's story was a wonderful faith journey where she told of her ups and downs as a foster child and how God gave her this wonderful family. She shared with us how her faith had grown as she never really had much experience in church until this family took her.

We were given a book of faith stories called *God in My Life*, written by the youth and ministers of the United Church of Christ. I was reading those stories one evening after I returned, and all of a sudden my eyes caught a page that had the words "NC State's Veterinary School." I quickly looked down and low and behold, there was a story written by Brittany H. Rogers. I thought to myself, "Wow, I know her!" and proceeded with reading her amazing faith story.

How do you express your faith? Is it through your stories, your gifts and talents, your prayers, or your actions? Expressing faith is important in our relationship with God. So I would like Brittany's story to be the close to my sermon today. We are celebrating our youth and their expressions of faith. This is truly an expression of faith.

Brittany's Story: "A little over two years ago, I found a strange bump on the side of my horse's mouth. The results came back saying it was a sarcoid tumor, something very common and harmless in horses. I kept watching the bump, and in the course of a week, it had doubled in size and had become hard. We trailered him up to NC State's Veterinary Hospital, where they did a second biopsy. That is when my world came crashing down.

The little bump wasn't a harmless sarcoid tumor, but it was coetaneous fibroid sarcoma. Cancer in horses is rare, and this is the rarest form. I was strong in the barn in from of my mom. I lost it when I went outside.

The first thought that crossed my mind was, "Why is God doing this to me?" Suddenly I felt a nudge on my shoulder, Strider, my horse, had followed me. I wrapped my arms around his neck, praying it wouldn't be the last time I did so. Frowning into this thick winter fur, I turned my head to the side. Looking up at the sky and the setting sun, I prayed. Prayed for Strider, prayed for me to be strong, prayed for vets who would be taking care of him.

A few weeks later, Strider started chemotherapy. About three months after that we took him up to NC State again to have the tumor removed. It had grown in size again because it had started feeding off of the chemo. The entire time that he was sick, I felt as though I had a friend by my side, pulling me along. Someone was helping me stay strong as I made my way through this maze. God was right there beside me and Strider. Today Strider is cancer free and back to the horse he was before all of this. This is just one time when I felt God's presence, and I will never forget it" (Rogers, 13).

Works sited:

Smith, Robert "Martin Luther's Definition of Faith: An excerpt from 'An introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans' [www.iclenet.org/pub/resources/text/twittenberg/luther](http://www.iclenet.org/pub/resources/text/twittenberg/luther)  
Tirabassi, Maren & Maria – *God in My Life*, 2008, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio