**God’s Spark**

***Part Three:Faith: What We Need When We Initiate Contact with God***

***Proposition:*** When we initiate contact with God, there is one condition that consistently enhances those encounters with God. That condition is faith.

***Evidence***

As we consider the evidence for this proposition, let’s return to the book of Matthew. Look at the variety of circumstances in which Jesus praises the faith of the persons coming to him.

**Faith from an outcast in the midst of the crowd. Matthew 8:1-4**

When Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount, he came down from mountain, followed by tremendous crowds. A leper appears in the midst of the crowd, probably unwelcomed and even shunned by the crowd for bringing an unclean status into their midst. Matthew records that the leper knelt before Jesus and expressed great faith, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” Jesus responds by healing the leper.

**Faith from a military leader. Matthew 8:5-13**

A military leader approaches Jesus and requests healing for his servant. When Jesus responds with an intent to visit his house, the centurion responds with, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof,” and further expresses his faith, “But only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.” Jesus acknowledges the faith of the centurion to the crowd, “Truly, I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith,” as well as to the centurion himself, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.”

**Conditional and unconditional followers. Matthew 8:18-22**

Jesus has just given orders to “cross over to the other side,” which often implies moving from Jewish into Gentile territory or from familiar to unfamiliar territory. As Jesus does so, two different persons approach Jesus, one a scribe and the other a disciple. The scribe approaches Jesus with the words, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus responds, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Silence could have been an indication of compliance from the scribe. A disciple also approaches Jesus, but with one condition, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus responds, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” While attending the funeral of a family member would seem to be adequate justification for missing work or any other endeavor, not in Jesus’ mind. It appears that Jesus is seeking unconditional followers.

**A lack of faith from the disciples. Matthew 8:23-27**

Jesus is asleep in the midst of a storm. It would appear to be a violent storm since the disciples shouted, “We are perishing!” but then there is the fact that someone is sleeping through the storm, so how bad can it be? We might also note the fact that some of the people in the boat might be professional fishermen. Whether the storm was strong enough to cause imminent danger or calm enough to sleep through, Jesus chastises the disciples for their lack of faith, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” and then stills the waters to a “dead calm.”

**The demons believe in Jesus. Matthew 8:28-34**

As Jesus comes to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs come out of the tombs to meet Jesus. They immediately recognize that Jesus has power and implore Jesus, “What have you to do with us, Son of God?” The demons within the demoniacs believe that Jesus has the power to heal the demoniacs and send them away, so they plead with Jesus to send them into the herd of swine. Following their show of faith, Jesus grants their request.

**The faith of friends. Matthew 9:1-8**

Jesus returns to his hometown and witnesses some people carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. Something is this picture reveals a sense of faith to Jesus. Presumably the faith is in the friends as Jesus remarks about the faith of the group rather than the individual. Might their destination or direction have revealed their faith? Or perhaps where they were coming from? Or the manner in which the paralyzed man was being carried? Or did Jesus simply see into their hearts and recognize their faith? Whatever the source, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’”

**Faith from a synagogue leader. Matthew 9:18-26**

A synagogue leader approached Jesus, knelt before him, and expressed his faith, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” Jesus followed the man to his house and discovered people in the midst of a wake. When Jesus declared that the girl was only sleeping, laughter ensued. “But, when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.” That was no laughing matter. It is interesting that the person in this story is simply referred to as a synagogue leader. Aren’t the scribes and Pharisees synagogue leaders? The voices of faith continue to come from unexpected places.

**Faith from a bleeding woman. Matthew 9:18-26**

On the way to heal a synagogue leader’s daughter, Jesus is touched by a woman who has had a bleeding problem for 12 years. As she touched his cloak, “She said to herself, ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well. Jesus responded, “Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well. And instantly the woman was made well.”

**Faith from a blind man. Matthew 9:27-31**

When two blind men run after Jesus following his latest encounter, Jesus tests their faith by asking, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” When they respond with, “Yes, Lord,” Jesus touched their eyes and commented on their faith, “According to your faith, let it be done to you.”

**Faith is not mentioned when Jesus approaches us. Matthew 12:9-14**

When Jesus sees a man with a withered hand, the people standing by seek to trap Jesus by asking Jesus, “Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?” Jesus responds with the parable of the lost sheep and proceeds to heal the man. Jesus does ask the man to stretch out his hand, which could be a sign of faith, but there is no explicit mention of faith in this passage. This is also a situation, however, in which Jesus approaches the person in need of healing rather than receiving a request from the person.

**Persistent faith from a Canaanite woman. Matthew 15:21-28**

Jesus enters into a territory far away from the disciples’ homeland. There, a Canaanite woman implores Jesus, ”Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Jesus is initially silent and the disciples urge Jesus to send her away. After she makes the request a second time, Jesus responds with a curious statement, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Some have suggested that Jesus was merely offering a quote as a test of her response and others have pointed out that “dogs” was a slang term for the Gentiles. In either case, she offers a clever comment in her third appeal, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Jesus answered, “Woman, great is your faith!” We don’t know if it was her cleverness or her persistence that revealed her faith, but Jesus offered a very strong affirmation of her faith.

**The disciples did not have enough faith to offer healing of their own. Matthew 17:14-21**

A man brings his epileptic son to Jesus for healing, explaining that he had first asked the disciples to do the same. After some harsh words, Jesus heals the boy. Later the disciples come to Jesus in private and ask, “Why could we not cast it out?” Jesus replies, “Because of your little faith.” Jesus then tells the parable of the mustard seed.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Several times in these passages, the person coming to Jesus approaches Jesus with an act of humility or worship. How might you humbly prepare yourself to approach Jesus with a request?
2. Faith is rewarded in each of the passages. How do you express your faith to God?
3. Has there been a time when you believe that God did not respond to you because of your lack of faith?
4. Faith appears to be essential when we approach Jesus with a request, but there are also times when Jesus approaches us. How has Jesus entered into your life recently?

**Lectio Divina/Dwelling in the Word**

Several American Baptist Churches are currently using Lectio Divina or Dwelling in the Word small group processes. The exploration of the God’s Spark material included with this document lends itself well to such a process. Here is a suggested outline:

1. Select a passage from the list above and ask two different persons to read the passage aloud in your small group.
2. Listen for the word or phrase that stands out to you and share that word or phrase with the group using “Mutual Invitation” until everyone in the group has had an opportunity to share.
3. Hear the passage read aloud a third time. This time listen for a place in the text where faith or a lack of it is identified. Share that with the group using “Mutual Invitation.”
4. Hear the passage read aloud a final time and reflect upon what God is inviting you to do in regards to your faith in God. Share your reflections with the group using “Mutual Invitation.”