In the letter to the Galatians, Paul exhorts that, "we know a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." This idea of being justified through faith is huge. It's connected to what we believe about G-d, our salvation, and how we are called to live. But what does this all mean? What is faith and what does it require? How do we know when our faith is "right" or "good" or even just "good enough"?

A few years ago, my brother shared this joke with me and, if you'll permit me, I'd like to share it with you now. A man, let's call him Steve, is at a party one night and he sees a stranger sitting all by himself in the corner. He walks over to introduce himself and asks the man his name.

"My name is Bob," the stranger said, "and I don't know why I came to this party. I don't have any friends and no one likes me here."

"Don't say that," Steve said, "Talk to me for a while and let's get to know each other. I'm sure we have a lot in common."

After Bob agrees, Steve jumps right in and asks, "Well… Are you religious or are you not religious?"

"I'm religious," Bob says.

Steve replies, "So am I! I knew we had things in common. Well, all right. Are you Christian or are you Buddhist?"

Bob says, "I'm Christian."

"Me too! Ok, ok. Are you Protestant, or are you Catholic?"

"I'm Protestant."

With great excitement, Steve exclaims, "I can't believe it! I'm Protestant too! This is great! Well, are you Baptist, or are you Episcopalian?"

Looking a bit hopeful, Bob replies, "I'm Baptist."

"I'm Baptist! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of the Lord, or Baptist Church of God?"

Bob says, "I'm Baptist Church of the Lord."

"Unbelievable! I'm Baptist Church of the Lord! Are you Baptist Church of the Lord Reformation of 1878 or are you Baptist Church of the Lord Reformation of 1912?"

"I'm Baptist Church of the Lord Reformation of 1912."

At that, Steve suddenly exclaims "You heretic! I can't be friends with you." and storms away.

As ridiculous as this story is, there's also a grain of truth in it. Often, when we think about faith or what we believe in, we think of specific doctrines or denominations or theological concepts. When I was a kid, every Sunday morning in church there was a time of our service set aside for our "Affirmation of Faith." Every week we said the "Apostles' Creed": "I believe in G-d the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." My first idea of what it meant to have faith began, "I believe..." and listed out all of the concepts that the early Church viewed as important.

Don't misunderstand me - being able to say what we believe is absolutely vital. We can gain so much comfort from affirming that we believe that G-d created the world and that Jesus rose again from the dead. Yet, when we focus too much on precisely what we believe we run the risk of Bob's encounter with Steve. We come to believe that we, who have a comfortable handle on our beliefs, are right and those OTHER guys are just plain wrong (or they're heretics or they need to be saved or whatever else.)

I don't think that this is what the Bible, G-d, Christ, or the Spirit are urging us towards. If we return to Paul's letter to the Galatians, we see the phrase, "a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." That seems pretty specific, pretty clear, and

pretty straightforward. Bare minimum, we need to believe in Jesus to be justified - to be saved. In Greek, though, the sentence reads a little differently. Rather than someone being justified through faith in Jesus Christ, the Greek phrase, "pisteos iesou xristou" is better translated this way, "a person is justified not by the works of the law, but through the faith *of* Jesus Christ." It doesn't say, "justified through faith IN Jesus Christ," but, "justified through the faith OF Jesus Christ." This seems like a pretty big difference. This means that it is not our own faith - our own ability to believe this or that doctrine of the church that saves us. It is Jesus' own faith that opens the way for us to be justified, to be saved. Jesus acts and we receive the grace and the blessing.

When we look to the Bible to help us understand what faith is, we see a very different picture than we often first assume. In Hebrew, for example, there are nine different words for faith – nine words! – but none of them is translated to mean a, "system of beliefs." The same is true of the Greek, by the way, but let's just focus on the Hebrew. One of the words is אמן. Its meanings include, "to rely on," "to put trust in [someone or something]," and, "to be faithful or loyal." We often translate it as, "believe" or, "have faith in," but the idea of trust is central here. In fact, you know a form of this word already – at the end of every prayer, we say, "Amen," which means, "I trust that G-d will make it so." Another Hebrew word we often translate as faith is בָּטַח,. But, here again, it is better translated as, "to feel safe," "to trust," "to be full of confidence."[i] *Batach* is the same Hebrew word that shows up in Psalm 62:8 "Trust in G-d always, my people."

What we are reminded of again and again when we read the Bible is that faith is, above all, about trusting G-d. We are asked to be loyal to G-d - to be faith*FUL* rather than to have faith. Whatever else we might believe or question, whatever we might suffer or worry about, whatever befalls us or those we care about, underneath everything our faith calls us to trust G-d. And this

is no small thing - this is why we see the call to trust G-d being repeated over and over, hundreds and hundreds of times in the Bible. This is why we feel the stirring of the Spirit within us urging us to trust, even when we cannot see a way out - even when the light fades and it seems that it will never return. As much as we might like to know and understand and be able to explain what was, what is, and what will be, we cannot. No system of beliefs can give us the certainty that only G-d possesses.

And so, if our faith is founded on trust, we can truly step out in faith even when we haven't got it all figured out. We can speak to the injustices that we see and work for a better world, knowing that the ark of history is curved towards justice; that, somehow, some day, G-d is making the kingdom of heaven a reality on earth – even here. This hope that we cling to is vital in a world of hurt and fear, terrorism and killings on the street. As people of faith – people who trust G-d – we know that no one should lose their lives in cold blood at the hands of the police. We know that police should not lose their lives in the line of duty. We know that people of color should not fear those who are tasked to serve and protect all of us. We see violence and distrust growing; the media and politicians drawing lines in the sand, vilifying gunshot victims or the police or even the innocents who are uninvolved who fear for their lives and their families' lives on a daily basis. As people who trust in G-d, we must seek to see each one as a child of G-d – each fear, each hope, each striving as real for that one. We must not choose to distance ourselves from this reality that so many face, but come with a message of hope for all people. Because hope does not need to blame anyone; hope does not need to exclude anyone from a better life. Our hope in Jesus Christ – our faith in Jesus Christ was made real for all of us when he came in glory and burst the bounds of the grave to save us from the weight of evil and sin and hopelessness.

Trusting in G-d, we can look to the one bleeding on the road. We can look at that misery and not seek to excuse it or justify it, but really see how the wounds might be bandaged, how the road might be made safer, how we can walk forward as friends and neighbors. Martin Luther King once preached on the Good Samaritan story. He said, "The first question that the priest and the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' …But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'" Do we trust G-d enough to ask these questions? What will happen to those killed and wounded in the streets and their families? What will happen to the police force as many officers feel increasingly attacked and unsafe? What will happen to people of color if they can't be sure that the police are willing to serve and protect them? What will happen to us if we are so politically divided that we can no longer hear one another – that we forget that we are all in this together?

As these issues have grown in number and volume, they may seem too big, too deeply entrenched to ever be resolved. But our psalm reminds us, "In G-d alone my soul finds rest, for my hope comes from G-d, who alone is my rock, my salvation, my fortress: I will never be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in G-d always, my people; pour out your heart before G-d our refuge." Nothing is impossible with G-d. Hope is real; the promises of faith are real. Christ is the victory so let us not be timid as though we were unsure which way the world is turning. Let us not be afraid as though we are not sure of the power of G-d and the power of love. Let us act from our faith to work for reconciliation, to work for security and freedom, for the peace and happiness for each one.

Even though we are limited, we know one very important thing: we can trust G-d because G-d loves us. Trusting in that love fills our actions and our beliefs with life and purpose. It makes

our faith spirited and beautiful. Jesus' faith was perfect. He trusted in G-d's love and protection

so much that he offered his life in his birth, his ministry, his healing, his death, and his

resurrection. Though we will never match this perfect trust, his perfect faith, we know that Jesus

is our model, our guide in our walk with G-d. He will grant us all the faith that we need to work

for good in this world in his holy name. May we remember to trust in G-d at all times and to pour

out our hearts before G-d, our refuge. Amen.

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[i] http://internetbiblecollege.net/lessons/hebrew%20words%20for%20faith.htm