

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Sunday, February 14, 2021 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Zoom ONLY

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

A just released survey from the Pew Research people found that the pandemic has strengthened the faith of some, weakened the faith of others, but for most, left their faith unchanged. The survey results give us a reason to think about our own faith and how it is affected by troubles and how it helps us deal with them. So that will be the topic of our next class.

How To Participate:

We are offering *The Wired Word* class live via Zoom. The Wired Word Zoom discussion will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. You can also use these resources to reflect or study on your own, with your family/friends, and/or with your Abide Group.

Until further notice, there is NO in-person Sunday school due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

You can participate in *The Wired Word* virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>
or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592
Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220
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For more information about *The Wired Word* go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes/sunday-classes-for-adults.html#WiredWord>

For other learning opportunities through St. Paul's UCC go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes.html>

To subscribe or unsubscribe for the free weekly mailing of *The Wired Word* student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



Survey on How Pandemic Affects Respondents' Faith: Generally Unchanged

The Wired Word for the Week of February 14, 2021

In the News

A recently released survey of more than 14,000 people in 14 countries with "advanced economies" indicates that the pandemic has strengthened belief most among Americans, Spaniards and Italians, while having the most negative effect on religious belief among South Koreans.

In 11 of the 14 countries surveyed, more of the people surveyed said their religious faith was strengthened during the pandemic than those who said it was weakened. More Americans said their faith was strengthened than respondents of any other surveyed country: 28 percent versus a global median of 10 percent. Sixteen percent of Spanish respondents and 15 percent of Italian respondents also said their faith was strengthened during the pandemic.

In contrast, South Koreans were three times more likely to report their religious faith had become weaker during the pandemic: 9 percent, versus a global median of 3 percent.

Yong J. Cho, outgoing general secretary of the Korea World Missions Association, explains the Pew's findings among Koreans by offering two interpretations.

First, it reflects that South Korea is a "strong group-oriented society." "The whole country has been affected as a group." Second, Korean churches place a high value on in-person communal worship. "Christianity and other religions in Korea have emphasized the physical presence as an essential element of worship," he said. "Because of Covid-19, the very restricted physical gathering of the churches has weakened the passion of faith."

Despite these numerical differences from one country to another, however, the overall finding of the survey is that "generally, people in developed countries don't see much change in their own religious faith as a result of the pandemic," Pew researchers said.

Apparently, the degree of importance respondents attached to their faith to begin with made a difference in whether they said their faith was strengthened. Among those who said religion was "very important" in their lives, 49 percent of Spaniards, 45 percent of Americans, 44 percent of Italians, and 40 percent of Canadians reported strengthened faith. The global median was 33 percent.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Pew Survey: How Covid-19 Changed Faith in 14 Countries.](#) *Christianity Today*

[More Americans Than People in Other Advanced Economies Say Covid-19 Has Strengthened Religious Faith.](#) *Pew Research Center*

Applying the News Story

While we at *The Wired Word* found the survey results interesting, we're not sure how useful they are.

To start with, the researchers did not ask the respondents what their religious faith was, so it didn't reveal anything regarding how any specific religion was more helpful than another as believers deal with the pandemic.

The survey also didn't define "faith." Was it referring to adherence to a body of beliefs, a feeling of trust in a divine being or to religious practices or behavior motivated by religious beliefs? Or all three?

For another thing, it's not clear why Pew limited the survey to only countries with "advanced economies," leaving out Russia and the nations in Africa, Latin America and most of Asia. Those omissions make the survey's use of "global medians" ring hollow.

For yet another difficulty, since the pandemic has already lasted about a year and is not over yet, and has had differing spikes of infection from one country to another, the survey is at best a snapshot of how respondents were feeling about their faith at the time they responded to the survey questions. (Pew said, "Data for this report is drawn from nationally representative telephone surveys conducted from June 10 to August 3, 2020, among 14,276 adults in 14 advanced economies: the United States, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan and South Korea.")

What's more, what exactly is meant by one's faith being "strengthened" or "weakened" and how is such strengthened or weakened faith expressed?

Still, despite its shortcomings, the survey does give us room to consider how our faith -- how *your* faith -- is affected by not only the pandemic, but by hard times in general. So that will be the topic of this TWW discussion.

The Big Questions

1. What effect, if any, have matters related to the pandemic had on your faith in Christ?
2. Do you experience your religious faith as mostly a stable thing, or as something that fluctuates, and if the latter, why do you think it fluctuates?
3. What types of events, troubles, losses, pains, etc., if any, have caused you to trust God less? When, if ever, have they caused you to trust God more? What might account for the difference?

4. If you feel your faith has been strengthened by an event or experience, what changes did you make in your life as a result? What, if anything, changed in how you related to God? to others?

5. Overall, the survey concluded "generally, people in developed countries don't see much change in their own religious faith as a result of the pandemic." Are you surprised by that? Why or why not?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 17:20

[Jesus] said to them, "... For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." (For context, read 17:14-20.)

We all know what it's like to be faced with a task or problem that looms over us like a proverbial mountain. Jesus understood the feelings of inadequacy and helplessness such predicaments can raise, and so his statement about moving mountains deals not with the difficulty of the tasks themselves but with the difficulty of *believing* it is possible to move our mountainous troubles aside.

The question of faith, or belief, is basic because unless we have at least a small measure of confidence that a solution is possible, we are unlikely even to try to do anything about it. But faith is so potent that according to Jesus, if we have only a small amount of it, as small as a mere mustard seed, for instance, that is still enough to move mountains. But no faith at all means nothing will happen, at least not through our efforts.

Perhaps this kind of attitude occurs because many problems resist instant solutions. Jesus said faith could move mountains, but he didn't say it happened at once. More often the faith that moves mountains pushes a wheelbarrow and carries a pick and shovel, or other tools like vision, hope, determination and motivation. And often, it's a group endeavor.

Faith and doubt are always in a struggle in our lives. But when decisions have to be made, then faith must act on its recollection of God's goodness, its trust of his word. We need to focus on the power of God ... not the size of the opposition.

Questions: Do you consider the pandemic a mountain that needs moving, or a temporary obstruction in the road? What mountains currently loom before you? What mountains have you moved by faith?

Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (For context, read 11:1-3.)

Someone has described faith as walking on a bridge with a clear glass floor. What you can see is the depth of the chasm below, but what you need to trust in the strength of the glass -- "the conviction of things not seen," our text says.

Faith in Christ is like that, isn't it? Especially in times of trouble when what we can see beneath our faith can make us wonder just how substantial such trust is. We can also "see" the arguments of atheism that have grown more vociferous in recent years and which today are put forward by some eloquent spokespersons. Those arguments can be persuasive, and perhaps it crosses our mind that we are being naïve to ignore them.

We can see our doubts as well. They sometimes dance before our eyes when we're struggling to walk by faith.

What's more, we can view certain Christian doctrines -- such as the idea that Christ was raised from the dead, that God's kingdom will come and those who receive Christ will have eternal life -- and realize that we can't prove such things. The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, voiced how such a line of thought goes: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this

life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). Or, as *The Message* words that last bit, "If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot."

But Hebrews 11 speaks of what we see and what we don't. Consider verse 3: "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."

We should learn from the fact that we can be so easily misled by what we see. We can misunderstand the nature of almost anything and any person when we are working from just the externals. Conclusions based on external information or impressions will more often prove wrong than right and can lead us to invest ourselves in that which has no real substance.

In other words, faith is not something we somehow drum up with gumption and by stifling the clamor of doubts and other voices. Rather, faith is a way of seeing that what's under our feet, though it appears transparent, is actually the solid rock of Christ. Faith does not change the facts about the world in which we live, but it does change the conclusions we draw about those facts.

In the end, that's why Christianity is called "faith." Faith does not mean mindless acceptance of unsupported ideas, but neither does it mean belief because there is no other choice. The writer of the book of Hebrews said it exactly right: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Or as the older King James Version has the last phrase, "the *evidence* of things not seen" (italics added).

Faith is trusting God.

Questions: In what ways is your faith evidence of things not seen? What are those things not seen?

Philippians 4:11-12

Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. (For context, read 4:10-13.)

James 1:2-4

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (No context needed.)

The apostle Paul, who wrote Philippians, and the early church leader James, who wrote the book bearing his name, were "twice-born" individuals.

William James, in his classic work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, writes of "once-born" and "twice-born" people. This is something quite different from the concept sometimes called "born again." The once-born are people who sail through life without ever experiencing anything that shatters or complicates their faith. They may have financial problems or disappointments with their children, but they never go through a time when they say, "The religion I was raised in is a lie; that's not how the world works." Their understanding of God when they are old is not that different from their view of God when they were children: a benign heavenly parent who keeps the world neat and orderly.

William James' twice-born people are those who lose their faith and then regain it. But their new faith is very different from the one they lost. Instead of seeing a world flooded with sunshine, as the once-born do, they see a world where the sun struggles to come out after the storm but always manages to reappear. Theirs is a less cheerful, less confident, but more realistic outlook. God is no longer the parent who keeps them safe and dry. He is the power that enables them to keep going in a stormy and dangerous world. And like the bone that breaks and heals stronger at the broken place, it is a stronger faith than it was before, because it has learned that it can survive loss.

Somehow, twice-born people have learned to apply in the darkness what they learned in the light. Several years ago, one of Scotland's finest preachers, Arthur John Gossip, lost his wife to sudden death. He went to the pulpit as scheduled the following Sunday and said: "I do not understand this life of ours. But less can I comprehend how people in trouble and loss and bereavement can fling away peevishly from the Christian faith. In God's name, fling to what? Have we not lost enough without losing that too."

Twice-born faith is tough enough, practical enough, to know better than to turn its back on the one available resource.

Questions: Using William James' definition, do you consider your faith "twice-born"? Why or why not? What personal experiences can you point out to support your answer?

Exodus 18:3-4

The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been an alien in a foreign land"), and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh"). (For context, read 18:1-9.)

Gershom and Eliezer were the two sons of Moses. Moses named them to reflect his life experience. In Hebrew, "Gershom" means "alien there," which probably refers to Moses, at first, being too Egyptian for the Israelites and later to being too Israelite for the Egyptians. "Eliezer" means "God is help." Both sons' names are essential to Moses' story and to the story of the Israelites. They are both "alien" and "helped." Or, like us, they have both "trouble" and "help."

Putting both names side by side suggests that the help of the Lord is seldom synonymous with "problem solved," but it also does not mean "no aid."

Question: How do "trouble" and "help" together reflect your life experience as a Christian?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this: Someone has complained that faith is a marvelous cop-out for preachers. Whenever there is something difficult to understand, we can always say, "You have to have faith."

But that's a misunderstanding. Faith is not a magic ingredient we throw into life in order to make sense out of it. Rather faith is confidence in God, the trust that his purposes for humankind cannot ultimately be defeated.

2. Discuss this, from TWW team member Stan Purdum: "I was pastoring a church in Northwest Ohio in 1988, when that part of the state suffered a drought. The farmers in the congregation saw their fields dry up and their crops die. That was their livelihood, of course, but I was impressed that they did not stop attending church and they continued to put money in the offering plate. A cynic might look at that fact and say, 'Well, the farmers don't want to offend God and cause him to withhold more rain.' But I looked at the same facts and concluded, 'Look at their remarkable faith. They know that whether it rains or not, God is with them.'

"I was able to say that because faith shapes how I see the world. During that drought, I preached a sermon where I stated plainly how I see things. The sermon was based on a drought story from the Old Testament, where Elijah challenged the prophets of the false god Baal to bring rain, something they were unable to do. Then Elijah prayed, and the rains came. Here is something I said in that sermon:

But like Elijah we need to hold on to our belief in God's goodness. God will again send the rain on our land. We will continue to pray for it. Perhaps it is already too late for this year's crop, and we need to be ready to care for the farmers and others who will be most directly hurt by this dry summer. We need to find ways to do that even while we maintain our faith in the goodness and providential care of God.

"Religious faith is a way of seeing the world and life. That above all, is why I remain a Christian, for Christianity helps me to interpret life with a sense that it is good and that despite the pain and hurt of our world, it will come out right in the end."

3. Discuss this, from TWW team member Malia Miller: "I think the pandemic has been a litmus test for our faith. For those who relied on a more communal experience to maintain their spiritual growth, the lack of in-person worship forced them to take an honest look at their relationship with the Living God and decide how much of their spiritual life is dependent on worshipping with fellow believers in a traditional setting versus their own efforts to individually grow in faith."

4. Consider this: On the point that the survey did not ask respondents what their religious faith was, we have found the following from commonly available sources: While both Christianity (28 percent) and Buddhism (16 percent) are significant in South Korea, the majority of the people are irreligious (56 percent). In Spain, 60 percent are practicing or nominal Roman Catholic Christians, while 35 percent are nonbelievers. In the United States, some 63 percent are Christians of various sorts, while 28 percent are unaffiliated. While an inference can be made that Christians have increased during the pandemic, such is not provable by the data.

Responding to the News

This is a good time to think about what your faith means to you, and how it affects your outlook and hope for the future.

Prayer

O God, thank you for being our help in every time of trouble, and our ultimate refuge. In Jesus' name. Amen.