

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

**Adult Education: 20 September 2015**  
*The Language of Faith*

Today we begin a four part series in which we will explore the language of faith. What words do we use to describe the experience of faith? How do the words we use shape our own understanding? How do the words we use present barriers to those who have no experience of faith, or whose experience is different?

The purpose of our study is to increase our own understanding, and to better equip us to communicate about faith. But let's begin by talking about (using words about) how we think. Consciousness, self-awareness, how we think—however we think about thinking, and however we think about experience—we use words. Consciousness is, in effect, a construct of language. If my experience is as simple as “I am standing in a room,” this understanding of experience is still one which involves concepts articulated as first person awareness of being, “I am,” a participial state of being involving action, “I am standing,” a spatial awareness of enclosure, “in,” and a spatial awareness of compartmentalization, “in a room” (*i.e.*, of a building). All of this awareness and experience is stated in a thought using words, and that's even before I start internally articulating words that relate to the five senses of what I perceive about the room and any other occupants.

If I have no words I cannot express experience, but I also cannot understand experience myself. Lacking words I can still sense and react, but this state of being is far closer to a stimulus—response equation of a living organism (what in the language of the Bible is in Greek called *bios*) than to the totality of experience and awareness that includes a sense of personhood (called in the Greek *zoé*). In talking about faith, we are not called to describe *bios* to anyone. *Bios* can be observed and quantified, but *zoé*, while observable, can't really be quantified. We speak of the “quality of life” of a person as a relative thing (something which is more or less, as compared to itself at another time).

As with life, what about faith? Is faith a feeling, a subjective experience involving a degree of conviction, or is does faith involve thought propositions (conditions of validity) as an objective phenomenon? Faith involves first *trust* (in a Person), which involves relationship, before it involves mental assent. Even if we agree that faith involves both subjective experience and objective revelation, how do we communicate our own understanding of faith to another?

Let's begin with words and word association.

Exercise: Experience

Gather in small groups (about five people). In gathering, first think as an individual, about an experience in your life “involving God”.

- The experience need not be dramatic or “mystical”.
- The experience may be private or shared.

- The experience may or may not involve specific practices, like prayer or worship.
- The experience can be positive or negative.

Once you have selected a “God experience,” start by first writing down words you use in your own mind in thinking about the experience. Write these words down privately, without yet sharing them with the group.

- Do the words involve/describe emotions or feelings?
- Do the words involve/describe sensations or feelings?
- Do the words involve/describe specific “things” that are *thought of* or *experienced* as “good” or “beautiful”?
- Describe your experience of your state of *being* in the “God experience”.

How do you describe the experience of love, being loved?

How do you describe something as true?

### Exercise: Sharing

Use the words you recorded in relation to your personal “God experience” in a few short sentences that are shared in the group. Do this without labeling the experience. For example, make statements such as:

- “I felt God to be present/I thought God was present when I experienced ...”
- “I felt God to be present/I thought God was present when this happened ...”
- “God came to me as ...”
- “When God was gone I ...”
- “In \_\_\_\_\_ God is present to me.”

Try to do this without using labels for the experience as a totality. See if in your group you can start to understand what each other is talking about without the speaker saying what he/she is describing. *This is all deliberately “fuzzy” at this point. We are simply playing with word associations.* We are doing this to better experience the barriers we encounter in sharing faith.

**Next week:** Next week we will continue to explore the boundaries between subjective experience and objective reality, and how words allow us to classify “boundary issues”. We will explore the concepts of absolutes, and how the perception of/experience of absolutes may be shared.