



## A DROP OF FAITH

It was the last tree. It always was. After all the other trees were trimmed and pruned, Uncle Sol finally reached this very last one at the far end of his huge garden. He saved it for last because it was his favorite tree and because it required the most care. The ancient chestnut tree was one of the few to have survived the awful disease that had wiped out most of the native chestnut trees in America. Every year Uncle Sol climbed up his tallest ladder to inspect the branches and trim away any strangely colored twigs. So far he had kept his tree alive. The chestnut was taller than all the others in Uncle Sol's garden, but it was hard to tell because the back of Uncle Sol's great yard sloped steeply away down the side of a hill where there was more rock than grass. Every time he inspected the tree he had difficulty finding a good place to put the ladder. This year was no different.

Uncle Sol carefully leaned the long extension ladder against the trunk about the same place he always did. But the moment he stepped on the first rung, the ladder began to wobble terribly. "The frost coming out of the ground this spring must have made it more uneven than last year," he thought to himself. He readjusted the ladder and stepped on the rung again. It was better, but still shaky. He decided to return to the garage to get some short pieces of wood to wedge under the legs of the ladder to make it more stable.

Unbeknownst to Uncle Sol, his young neighbor David had been watching the pruning and trimming from behind the bushes. David was one of the more adventuresome boys in the neighborhood. Sometimes he liked to pretend he was a secret agent, trying to discover information and he would hide behind bushes and crawl around on his stomach trying

to get really close to people. Uncle Sol would just laugh whenever David popped up out of the bushes and he never scolded him, so David felt very comfortable playing his imaginary games in Uncle Sol's yard.

When he saw Uncle Sol leave the ladder unattended, David's first thought was to climb up into the tree and get into the branches to surprise Uncle Sol when he came back. He had always wanted to get into the chestnut tree, but the lowest branches were way too high for him to reach, no matter how hard he tried. When David stepped onto the first rung of the ladder, he felt it wobble, but he thought ... "I'll just climb it fast and it will be okay." David did climb fast ... but it wasn't "okay". The ladder started out wobbly, but the higher David got the more the ladder began to shake. Suddenly it began to swing sideways away from the tree. David was just able to grab hold of an overhanging branch as the ladder slipped away and clattered to the ground below. There he was, holding onto a branch high off the ground with a fallen ladder and rocks beneath him.

David didn't know what to do. He could barely see beneath his swinging feet, but there, directly below him, was the ladder draped over one of the larger rocks. "If I just let go and drop to the ground I'll break my leg or my arm or worse!" He looked above his head to the branch that was keeping him from certain disaster. There wasn't enough room to swing his leg up on it. He was too close to the trunk. And the trunk ... it was so large that he couldn't swing his legs around it either. He tried to move himself a little further away from the trunk to give himself more room to work, but the branch on the old chestnut was so much bigger than any of the other trees he was used to climbing, he felt like he was going to slip if he budged at all. That's when he decided to just start yelling, "Help! Help! Uncle Sol! Help me!"

Uncle Sol heard the panicked cry as he was emerging from the garage. He dropped the wooden wedges and began to run toward the backyard. As soon as he turned the corner around the end of the house, he could see that the ladder was no

longer propped up against the tree. In its place he saw a pair of jeans and sneakers against the dark trunk, and although branches hid the rest of the body, he could easily guess who it was without seeing more. “Hold on, I’m coming!” Uncle Sol yelled as he hurried down the long grassy yard toward the hill. David was always lurking around and showing up in the strangest places. “There’s only one child that could be,” he said to himself as he hurried toward the chestnut tree. “Hang on! I’m nearly there, David.”

David’s hands were hurting. The rough bark was digging into his palms. His fingers were numb. His arms were hurting. He wasn’t sure how long he could hold on. “Ohhhhh, my hands are slipping.” As he tried to tighten his grip, he nearly slipped off the branch. Beads of sweat covered his forehead. He could feel his heart racing in his chest. Blood was pounding in his ears.

“Help, Uncle Sol, help me!” But his voice trailed away as he focused all his energy into holding onto the branch. “Uncle Sol isn’t going to make it,” he thought. “I’m going to fall.” He closed his eyes and held on to the branch with what strength he had left.

Just then, he heard that familiar voice right below him.

“Don’t let go, David! Just a minute ... hang on. I’ll help you ...” Uncle Sol pulled the ladder out from under the tree. Positioning himself under David and a little behind him, he said, “David, I want you to do exactly what I tell you.”

There was panic in David’s voice. “Uncle Sol, Uncle Sol, ... I, I can’t see you, where are you?” “M’my hands are slipping! I’m gonna fall! I’m gonna get hurt.”

There was calm in Uncle Sol’s voice. “David, I won’t let you get hurt, but you must do exactly as I tell you. I will catch you, but you have to let go of the branch and drop straight down. Don’t twist around and don’t kick.” Even from behind the boy, Uncle Sol could see the struggle going on in David’s mind as David clenched his jaw and tried to tighten his grip on the branch again, still swinging his legs in a useless attempt

to wrap them around the trunk. "David, stop fighting and let yourself drop straight down."

All of a sudden, David grew still. His body relaxed. He let his hands slide off the branch and just let himself fall. And he fell right into Uncle Sol's waiting arms.

In the next moment, they were both sitting on the ground underneath the chestnut tree talking and laughing at the same time.

"Oh, Uncle Sol, I was so scared, I thought I was really gonna get hurt. I wasn't sure I could hold on till you got there and then I wasn't sure you could catch me ... but you did! You did!"

"David, you really frightened me! I knew I could catch you, but I was afraid you wouldn't believe that I could. If you hadn't trusted me to help you and done exactly what I said, you would really have gotten hurt."

"At first I didn't think you could do it because I couldn't see what you were doing, but then I thought, 'Uncle Sol has always done what he said he was going to do'. That's when I decided to relax and let go."

Uncle Sol unexpectedly turned serious, "Now promise me you won't ever climb up an unsteady ladder again ... ever. In fact, promise me that you won't climb up any ladder in my yard unless I'm right with you."

"Oh, I promise, Uncle Sol. Cross my heart and hope to die," said David as he made an X over his heart.

"No, *that* isn't necessary David, just a plain promise will do, thank you." Uncle Sol shook his head as he smiled and rolled his eyes toward the sky. "I think I'm going to get a drink of lemonade before I finish with that chestnut tree. Care to join me?"

The two neighbors walked back toward the house together, recounting to each other all over again the near accident and the great rescue. David could hardly wait to tell the other kids about Uncle Sol's great save. "You know, Uncle Sol, after my friends hear about this they're gonna want you to catch them, too! Maybe you'd better leave the ladder out!"

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Uncle Sol just shook his head and laughed. “That’s the best reason I’ve heard for putting it away, David.”

*1 Corinthians 15:20-26*

*Matthew 28*

Theological Foundation: see p.188

Guide for Non-religious Settings: see p.235

## APPENDIX B

### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE STORIES

Because I have an aversion to simply applying a single ‘moral’ or meaning to each of these stories, it seems important for you as the pastor, teacher, or parent to have a bit more background into my thinking about each one. One of my goals is to have everyone who uses these stories reflect theologically on the story’s scriptural underpinnings. The questions that are provided are not scaled to any specific age. I simply hope these questions will prompt your questions or that you will adjust the questions to meet the specific age abilities of the ones with whom you are sharing these stories.

#### *A Drop of Faith*

*I Corinthians 15:20-26*

*Matthew 28*

Life after death, eternal life, and resurrection are all words and phrases familiar to Christians. But the reality of trusting what you cannot see and believing the promises of God ... believing that Jesus is “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” ... is as much a challenge for us as it was for the first followers. The ability to trust God in life and in death comes from knowing this God to be a God of love who rescues, who deeply cares about each unique human life, who has made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf and knowing that reality personally.

At the point of life when we are utterly incapable of helping ourselves any longer; at the transition from this life to the life to come, believing is the power to let go into God's loving eternal embrace.

David, for all his mischievousness and self-reliance, calls on the one he believes he can count on to help him in his time of need. At that moment, hanging in the tree, David first tries to rely on his own strength to rescue himself from a desperate situation. When he is confronted with his inability to help himself, he calls upon Uncle Sol. His relationship with Uncle Sol is such that he believes his elder friend will be able to keep him safe even in the midst of trouble. It is only when Uncle Sol asks him to do what seems crazy that David balks and tries once again to save himself. Only the reliability of the relationship with Uncle Sol gives David the courage to utterly entrust himself to Uncle Sol's care by dropping from the branch to the arms he can only hope are there and ready to catch him.

### *Questions*

1. Is Uncle Sol at fault for David's troubles? (Is God to blame for the circumstances of our lives?)
2. How does David get himself into trouble?
3. How is trusting God with our lives like David trusting Uncle Sol to catch him?
4. Why did it take courage for David to let go?
5. Why does it take courage to trust God with our lives?
6. How might we get to a point where we can trust God whom we cannot see as much as David trusts Uncle Sol?

### *Team Effort*

*1 Corinthians 12:4-11*

St. Paul gives us such a clear picture of how God works in community. No one person is given all the skills, talents, wisdom or strength to do everything in the church. Each person

## APPENDIX C

### GUIDE FOR USE OF CROSS-OVER STORIES THAT WORK IN NON- RELIGIOUS SETTINGS

There are stories in this collection that have worked well in public school settings where I've been invited to tell stories. If teachers wish to explore character development through storytelling, I have selected stories that easily transfer to a non-religious setting and non-religious conversations. The questions are often open-ended enough to allow for a wide-ranging discussion of decision-making, responsibility, courage, kindness, and other related virtues that can help students succeed in life as cooperative and productive members of society.

#### *A Drop of Faith*

Trusting another human being with our lives is an important and often times frightening lesson for those unaccustomed to trusting others. Our current culture fosters excessive self-dependence. The words spoken by toddlers, "I can do it myself" have been elevated to a place of high regard in our day. The problem is—we can't do it ourselves. It's a lie. It's an illusion that breaks down when we stop and think more carefully about our lives: from relying on a electric grid to power our homes to counting on those who truck in foods from all around the globe into our local stores. We do little on our own that sustains our way of life. In reality we stand within an amazingly intricate web of trusting relationships with people

we have never met. Our very health and well-being depend upon thousands and thousands of people doing their jobs correctly and well. The growing edge for children in the area of trust includes how to decide whom you can trust and how trust is reestablished once it has been lost.

In the story “A Drop of Faith,” trust is the paramount issue. Can David trust Uncle Sol to actually catch him if he lets go of the branch? There are layers of trust in this narrative: trusting the laws of nature, trusting one’s own strength, trusting a friend, trusting that promises made will be promises kept. Here are a few questions to prompt discussion with your students.

### *Questions*

1. What makes you—as a listener—believe that Uncle Sol and David have a good relationship?
2. Does David cause Uncle Sol to wonder if he can continue to trust him in his yard?
3. Does Uncle Sol test David’s willingness to trust him?
4. When Uncle Sol catches David, David has one more reason to trust Uncle Sol. What might have happened if Uncle Sol had dropped David? Would that be different than Uncle Sol catching David but then falling with David in his arms?
5. How does Uncle Sol set up the way David can prove he is trustworthy?
6. If David breaks his promise to Uncle Sol, how will that affect Uncle Sol’s ability to trust David?
7. How do your students earn trust—yours, other students’, administrators’? What are the ways students can regain a trust that has been broken? Between teacher and student? Between student and students?
8. What makes trust so important in a relationship?