

## Sermon for August 7, 2016 – “Having Faith”

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16; Luke 12:32–48

One of the first things that they teach you in seminary is the maxim that the simpler the question – the tougher the answer. Throughout the last few millennia volume after volume of scholarly work have been written considering questions that are strikingly stark: Who is Jesus? Why does evil happen? What is salvation? What is the point of the church? The simpler and more direct these questions are the more pressing they become. This isn't because the simpler questions are somehow unanswerable or because the Christian tradition lacks adequate responses. No, the simplest questions can be hardest to answer because our faith tradition has bequeathed to us a glorious excess of images and narratives through which we can address the deepest issues of life. Christians are often reduced to a kind of blessed stuttering. Not because we lack things to say but because we struggle to know which of the **many** available answers is the **right** one for a given situation.

In my childhood, the adults who surrounded me often emphasized the importance of “having faith.” “Have faith in Jesus” was the deceptively clear advice. It was meant to reassure me and discourage me from worrying too much about problems and the harder questions of life. In hindsight, however, the advice only served to motivate me to try to find out more about what it meant to have faith in what cannot be seen. Teresa of Avila wrote that “Christ has no body but yours,” but the truth is that I became more and more confused. I was being asked to have faith in a person whose presence was far from obvious and that created more problems than it solved. The simpler the answers, the more the questions kept nagging me. I went through youth ministry, seminary and then into ordained ministry. The more familiar I became with the Christian tradition's vast repertoire of images for “having faith” – the more I found myself mentally stuttering when I was faced with certain questions: “What does having faith actually mean?” “How do I know if I have it?” “What does that look like?” “What difference does it make?”

The New Testament, especially the letter to the Hebrews, consistently portrays Abraham as the shining example of faith. Abraham was willing to “set out” in obedience to God's command. He was willing to go despite not knowing where he was bound or how (even if) his family would survive the journey. God said, “Hey Abraham, I need you to gather up your stuff and move.” Abraham said, “Where?” God said, “I'll tell you when you get there!” Abraham said, “Okay!” His example of faith as a pilgrimage taken on the “conviction of things not seen” still resonates deeply in the Christian imagination. One of the most powerful features of the letter to Hebrews narrative is the way it highlights the longing of Abraham and his descendants for “a better country,” a city that is worthy of being a true “homeland.” They responded to God's call not with self-satisfaction but with more longing...Longing for a city in which they'd no longer be strangers and foreigners. The fact that this passage is shot through with longing gives it a unique place among the images that a Christian might choose when answering, “What is faith?”

Often faith is understood to be the answer to longing. One longs for something more than what one can see in life and finds blessed assurance in faith. I don't think that this is wrong, I think it's more than okay to long for something better. I think longing itself is an expression of faith especially the longing for God's kingdom to become a reality. I don't think it devalues life on earth; it certainly **can**, but it doesn't **have** to. The heavenly city doesn't reduce the value of our home on earth, it enlivens that home with possibility and energy for action.

Dissatisfaction with a world that's subject to death and injustice can motivate us but desiring transformation of the world as it is and longing for a home beyond this world are not contradictory impulses. The push and pull between the two creates a space where the gospel can encounter and encompass the human experience in all its depth. I mean, when we rail at injustice or mourn in the face of loss we're making a statement. We're affirming that the very act of crying out is not in vain. When we long for a life beyond what seems likely or possible, we bear witness, however tentatively, to the reality of such a life. When we become so resigned to the world of pain that we no longer bother to yearn, when we become so cynical that we no longer look toward heaven, then I think that we've lost something crucial, something essential to our humanity.

Longing, in its own way, is one way the world as God will make it enters our lives. But there's one problem there. At some point, longing as an expression of faith isn't enough. Faith itself isn't enough. And, to paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, we must be a part of the change that we want to see in the world. More to the point, we must become part of what God is **already** at work doing in the world.

I think that's the point of the gospel reading. As the faith that comes from longing enters our lives it must, at some point, become that which drives our actions. Our gospel reading is a stark reminder that we must "be dressed for action and have our lamps lit". We must **"be like those waiting for their master to return...So that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks."** Jesus tells the disciples in no uncertain terms that **"from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required...And from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."** This goes way beyond the phrase that appears on t-shirts and bumper stickers: "Look busy, Jesus is coming!"

Interestingly, we're part of a Christian tradition that cherishes the promise that not only do we **not** have to earn our salvation but that we actually **can't**. It is, as Jesus declares in this morning's gospel reading, God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. Gifts, by definition, cannot be earned but only generously given and gratefully received. The simple promise that God unconditionally gives us his grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness is the heart and soul of the gospel. As comforting to anguished souls as this promise may be, however, at times it can also be debilitating. What do I mean? Well, if we understand and accept that we cannot earn salvation, that we are justified by grace through faith, that there's nothing we **can** do, it seems to me that we can all too easily slide into the assumption that there's nothing we **should** do. But when we say it like that, when we say it out loud, it doesn't seem right – does it? I don't think it does.

The words of James' letter keep echoing in my head; his belief that "faith without works is dead" is just rattling around up there. Okay then, if there is some doing involved, exactly what is it that we're supposed to do? Well, here's where we start heading out into deeper waters because right after his promise, **"it is Your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom,"** Jesus goes on to tell his disciples, **"Sell your possessions, and give alms. He says, 'make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven...Where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.'"** Our initial reaction might be to wonder if we heard Jesus right, did he really just tell us to sell all our stuff? We might then ask: "Why?" To which Jesus would answer: **"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."** So where are our hearts? Now, if this was your typical stewardship sermon we'd start talking about money and possessions here. Of course, this, strictly speaking, isn't a stewardship sermon, not as such. But even if it were stewardship isn't strictly about money or wealth or possessions. Because stewardship is, or should be, a **response** to all that we've received from God's hands. A natural **extension** of our faith, a visible, tangible **expression** of our faith.

So, saying “we don’t have to do anything” to earn God’s love is by no means the same thing as saying “we should do nothing” in response to God’s love and gift of the kingdom. If our hearts are right, we will, in fact, do something. On some level, I’m not sure we can help it. Human beings are forever creatures in motion, restless from birth, finally still only in the grave. The question, therefore, is not whether we **will** do something, but **what** we’ll do and **why**.

Now, before too many objections are raised, rest assured that I recognize that our penchant to justify ourselves is alive and well and that again goes back to the state of our hearts. I say that because humans are at heart insecure and always a little desperate to assert our independence, for some, God’s promise of acceptance/forgiveness can be unsettling, maybe even a little frightening. Admitting need feels like death to the self-made man or woman. So much better, therefore, to have something of **our own** to fall back on. Maybe, a spark of faith, the claim that we’ve invited Jesus into our heart, a few good works every now and then, a healthy bank account and a record of generous giving. All of this it would seem is better than depending completely on God’s sheer mercy alone. But asserting God’s unconditional grace is only half of the story. We’re not only freed from anxiety regarding our relationship with God, we’re also freed **for** (but, unfortunately, not **from**) life in this world. This, also, is the heart of the gospel promise. We’re freed from fear of scarcity so we can be generous with others...Remember the lesson of the parable of the Rich Fool? The guy who stored up his grains and goods in his increasingly larger barns in anticipation of a day that would never come? We’re freed from the fear of condemnation so we can forgive others. We’re freed from the fear of falling short, the fear of failure, so that we can live for our neighbors. We’ve been freed from all that. Freed to share with others the good news. The good news that God is pleased to give us, all of us, the kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, here’s the thing...Faith, as attested in our first reading about Abraham, creates the courage to risk, to dare, to do; not because we **have** to but because we **can**, because we **want** to. I’ve believed for some time now, that the Christian life is about more than just faith, more than just simply agreeing to certain doctrine or tenets of our tradition. I believe that what we **do** – how we **live** – matters. It matters to our neighbor and to God. Perhaps it’s faith that provides us a reason to come to church. Sure, we come to hear that God has done all things for us in Christ. It makes us feel better about ourselves. It comforts us, makes us feel all warm and fuzzy, and that’s fine. But don’t we also come needing to hear that God has something for us to do as well? Something that matters? Something worth doing? Something that gives us the sense of belonging and purpose that we all crave? So many times, I’ve heard from folks that they come to church to get their spiritual batteries recharged. That’s nice, but for what end? So we can go back out into the world? So we’re just able to get through the week? To some extent – yes – but I truly believe that there has to be more. Jesus said that he came so that we might have abundant life. So maybe there’s more to life than we realize, maybe there’s more to faith than we realize. Maybe it’s more than simply holding to a particular set of beliefs that may have been misinformed or incomplete to begin with. Maybe, it’s about the state of our hearts and minds, maybe it’s about the state of our relationship with God in Christ, our perception of what God was/is doing in the world and in our lives. Maybe we’ve been looking at it wrong or leaning too much on our own understanding.

So here it is, brothers and sisters. Here’s an opportunity to start fresh. After all, God’s mercies are new each and every day. Here’s our invitation to not only **proclaim** our salvation through what Christ has done but to **exhibit** for all to see the character of our Christian lives by reminding us of our freedom in Christ to **do** something ourselves. It’s an invitation to love our neighbor, to care for creation. To reach out to those in need, to give for the sheer delight of it. It’s an invitation to forgive even as we’re forgiven. To embrace the future. To receive all good things in humility and gratitude.

Why? Because we **should**? Well, um, yeah. I mean, isn't this what God wants both **from** us and **for** us? Yes, it is. So, yes we should. But even more we should do it because we **can**. Because this is what God has freed us **for**. Sound like heresy? Well, sometimes heresy and orthodoxy are closer than we imagine. So go ahead – as Nike says – just do it. And as I've heard others say – no guts, no glory! Because of Christ we're free to do amazing and wondrous things. We're free to live like there's no tomorrow. All because God delights to give us the kingdom **today**.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.

Life is what happens to us while we're making other plans...

Big plans for the future.