

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

August 29, 2010

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Faith Looks Like...

(Last in a four-week Sermon Series on Faith)

For the past three weeks we've been learning about faith through the teachings of the writer of the book of Hebrews.

We started with a definition: Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. We then saw what this kind of faith did in the lives of people from the Bible – Abraham and Sarah, Noah, Moses.... Then we looked at what / who our faith is in and we looked at the importance of worship.

We also learned that the church and people this book was written for were suffering terribly for their faith. They were imprisoned, oppressed, tortured and killed. The first century was a very difficult time to be a Christian. And it's good for us to remember that there are places in the world still like this.

But the truth is, we're not facing prison or persecution for being Christian. The pressures we're under are not so physically severe, but they're real nonetheless. Henri Nouwen describes it well:

Beneath all the great accomplishments of our time there is a deep current of despair. While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world. (In the Name of Jesus, 1989)

And if that doesn't describe you, still we're constantly bombarded with influences which are diametrically opposed to a life of faith.

So let's see if what the author of Hebrews wrote 2000 years ago to the persecuted Christians of the first century can still guide us today.

We get a set of six ethical teachings which show us how to live as a community of faith – the church – in a world that is indifferent at best to what the church is all about. To return to the image of the Christian life as a race (12:1), these words function as marks along the trail. They keep us on the path and on our way to the goal.

The **first** mark, which forms the foundation for all the rest, is **love**. First, he points us to the love of fellow believers in the church: "let mutual love continue" (13:1). The word here is *philadelphia*, the Greek noun expressing the love between brothers and sisters. Christians are family, and we must continue to nurture and strengthen that bond if we are to find our way.

But love also has an external dimension. As we show love to our brothers and sisters, we do not wall ourselves off as members of a distinct tribe. We are also to show love to the stranger

through the gift of hospitality (13:2). In the first century, hospitality was a practical virtue because inns were disreputable and often unsafe places. There were no Ramada Inns or Motel 6s.

Though our circumstances are different, hospitality—paying attention to the stranger—is a real demonstration of Christian love. We must become welcoming and inviting congregations, because when we are hospitable, we too receive gifts as we may entertain "angels without knowing it" (13:2).

A **second** mark along the trail is to **show care in times of distress**. Hebrews mentions two crises in particular: those who are in prison and those who are being tortured (13:3). And the point is that we're to have a depth of compassion in the true sense of the word: suffering-with-others. Our life is a life in the body of Christ, and just as Jesus identifies with our tests and shares our vulnerability (2:14, 18; 4:15), so we should identify with those of our sisters and brothers.

The **third** mark is **fidelity**: we should honor marriage, and we should be faithful to our marriage covenants. Such faithfulness sets us apart from the broader culture and strengthens the bonds of the community. Infidelity is not a private matter; it hurts more than just the individuals involved, and as such it can weaken and hurt the larger community.

Contentment with what we have is the **fourth** mark of the trail (13:5). Do not greedily seek more to secure our lives. Rather we are to trust in God's promises of presence and protection. Remember God will not leave us or forsake us (13:5). And even more than simply be with us, God is our helper, and involved in our lives (13:6).

Billy Graham tells the story of a man and his wife who visited an orphanage where they hoped to adopt a child. In an interview with the boy they wanted, they told him in glowing terms about the many things they could give him. To their amazement, the little fellow said, "If you have nothing to offer except a good home, clothes, toys, and the other things that most kids have - why - I would just as soon stay here." "What on earth could you want besides those things?" the woman asked. "I just want someone to love me," said the little boy.

A **fifth** mark is **loyalty and constancy**. We should remember those who have spoken the word of God to us, for their faithfulness stands as an example for us (13:7). The ultimate example of faithfulness, of course, is Jesus (12:1-3), who "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8).

The **final** mark is **proper worship**, and, in particular, **proper sacrifice**. Now that we are living under the new covenant in Jesus, we are to respond with an offering of thanksgiving. First we are called to offer a sacrifice of praise as we confess Christ's name. But acceptable sacrifice moves beyond the arena of worship and confession.

And then since we have received grace and trust in God's provision, we are to extend such grace toward others through doing good and by sharing what we have. We honor our generous God by living with open hands. We do not cling to our resources in order to secure our own lives in the face of an uncertain future. Instead, we share what we have as divine gifts entrusted to us as stewards of God's bounty.

And our generosity toward others ought to be a sacrifice on our part. Think about it – how generous am I if I have ten coats and I give you 1 of them? Not much sacrifice on my part. But if I have 2 coats and I give you 1 of them – that's a far more generous act.

I witnessed the generosity of a congregation when I was serving the church in Acton. It was a few days before Christmas and a woman who was going through a terrible divorce came to see me. She had two young boys at home and confessed to me that she had NOTHING for them for Christmas. They had no tree, no gifts, nothing. I asked her for some information about the boys – sizes, hobbies, what they might need or like.

And then I made two phone calls. One to the Good Shepherd Network coordinator (the helping ministry of the church) and one to a man in the church who was known for being generous behind the scenes. Remember this is the week of Christmas!

That afternoon I met Bill at the Christmas Tree lot in the hardware store parking lot – he bought her a tree, stand, lights etc. and I drove over to her house. She was so moved that a tree was arriving so quickly. I told her I'd be back in a day or two.

Well, over the next two days, the gifts poured into my office, including a signed World Series Baseball under glass from a former Sports Illustrated executive in the congregation. So I loaded my car and drove to her house. I grabbed a few bags and went to the front door. She teared up as soon as she saw me! And then I said, “but there’s more – come to the car!” When she saw the back of the station wagon stuffed with gifts she nearly collapsed. We carried them in and sorted them, discovering a substantial number of gifts for her!

Remember – this is just days before Christmas. The generosity here is not so much in the cost of the gifts, but in the sacrifice of time and effort. At a time when we tend to focus in more and more on the needs of our own families and households, the people of God turned toward someone who needed them desperately.

That’s what those two lines we say back and forth after the offering are all about. They were a wonderful addition to worship by Jim who was the interim pastor here before me; and I’ve never seen them in any other church. But they are wonderful words:

We shall not offer God,
That which costs us nothing.

That’s what that means. Our giving, whether our offering in worship, or our relationships with others, or our relationship with God even, “cost’s” us. But what we are “losing” is nothing compared to the abundant life we find in Christ.

And, you know, acceptable worship really encompasses the other five marks of a life of faith. Because worship isn’t only expressed by what we do here in this sanctuary. It infuses all of life.

In our love for each other or for strangers or in our care for those in crisis, we are worshipping God. In our sharing that reflects our trust in God rather than possessions, we are worshipping God. In our faithfulness to our covenants and to the example of those who have gone before us, we are worshipping God.

When faith looks like love, hospitality and caring for other - faithfulness, generosity, sacrifice, loyalty and proper worship of God - then the church becomes the front porch of the kingdom of God.

That’s a good way for us to think of ourselves – the front porch of the kingdom of God.

C. S. Lewis once noted that, while most Christians may think what they want most is to possess life's beauty, this is really not really our deepest hope. The deepest hope and desire we have is to share and to participate in the beauty of life with others.

I think he's got it right.

The poet George Herbert had in mind the sharing of life's goodness and love when he wrote, "There is no greater sign of holiness than the procuring and rejoicing in another's good."

Isn't this really life's greatest challenge and adventure into which God invites us through our faith...

To do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (v. 16)

That's what faith looks like – the front porch of the kingdom of God.
Amen.