

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

August 8, 2010

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Faith Is....

(First in a four-week series on Faith from the Book of Hebrews)

For the remaining Sundays in August, I will preach four sermons from the final chapters of *Hebrews* on faith.

The book of Hebrews in the New Testament makes an almost “lawyer-like” case for Christianity and believing in Christ. The author was probably writing for Jews who knew the Old Testament Scriptures and used many examples of heroes of the faith to make his point. The last few chapters contain verses that are memorable and pithy and focus on what faith is and looks like.

Aug. 8: Faith Is...

Aug. 15: Faith Does....

Aug. 22: Faith In....

Aug. 29: Faith Looks Like....

There's a lot we DON'T know about the book of Hebrews. We don't know who wrote it, or when exactly, or for whom precisely. But we DO know that whoever it was written for was under enormous pressure. Some had lost their jobs because they were Christians, some had had their property seized by the state (again because they were Christians). Real physical suffering, death threats and torture were the ugly reality of their lives.

And in this environment, it makes a lot of sense that many were seriously questioning their faith. Was it worth it? Was it true? What is its purpose, other than to bring on suffering?

And while modern Americans don't suffer for their faith the way the early Christians did, or the way Christians in other parts of the world today do, still these are our questions as well as theirs; and it will be good for us to spend these weeks thinking about them.

You might say Hebrews is written to put faith back in place. Sure they had faith; but the crises on their lives had displaced their faith with fear and all that fear brings with it. The author argues long and hard for the Hebrews to hang in there and keep the faith. Don't give up! The message rings across the pages of this little book and across the ages to us today: **Keep the Faith!**

The problem is that faith is a very abstract term. You can't see it, measure it, weigh it, touch it. It's out there, in the mists of the mind somewhere.

The first verse of our reading gives us the best definition of faith there is in the Bible – and the most memorable. If you've not memorized this verse, I commend it to you:

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

And while it is a very quotable quote, it doesn't give us much to hang our hat on. It's not a very concrete definition. Some of the older translations say, *the substance of things hoped for*. Which is even more puzzling in my mind.

I remember in seminary, we were studying this passage and looking at the word *substance*, and a student asked what exactly the author meant by *substance*.

The professor took a chair, stood on it and said, "There, the chair, that's substance."

How can what we hope for have substance?
How can we have convictions around things we cannot see?

Even with the illustration of the chair, we're still in the world of the abstract.

Thankfully, the author of Hebrews does not leave faith as an abstraction. The rest of the chapter, often called the "Faith Hall of Fame," paints a series of vivid pictures of faith.

Do you want to know what faith is?
Do you want to find your displaced faith?
Do you want to know what Christianity is all about?
Well, watch this!

And then follows the portraits of the heroes to hang on the walls of our minds. (Not unlike the wall of photos that every church has....)

Abel, Enoch, Noah (We skipped over those verses, but they're all introduced to us in the same manner – by FAITH Abel, by FAITH Enoch, by FAITH Noah.)

And then, by FAITH Abraham and Sarah... and we hear again the great story of their lives. (The kids going to VBS will spend their first day with this story.)

How they lived far from the Promised Land that would become Israel; and how God told them to pack up and move. He was going to give them a land they'd never seen nor heard of. His people would be a great nation in that land some day, God said.

Wow! I wonder how I'd respond if I heard God calling me and my family to something that dramatic and life-changing....

Well, Abraham and Sarah, as we know, packed up all their belongings, gathered their extended family and headed for the Promised Land, hundreds of miles away.

By faith he made his home like a stranger in a foreign country.

Canaan, the land that God was leading them through and to, was nothing like where they had come from. It had walled cities on every hill, each with a pagan, bloodthirsty king inside. Enough to make anyone question their faith and purpose.

I imagine if we visited Abraham and Sarah and walked with them through the countryside and asked, "Sarah, Abraham, where is your faith?" Abe might answer slowly, but surely, "See that tent parked right there in the middle of this hostility? There's my faith. What God promises must be true. I've staked my life on it. I live like it."

The tents were visible evidence of Abraham and Sarah's faith – their “chair.” They built their lives on this promise of God.

And we can too. Faith is about the direction our feet go. It's about the way we spend our time and our money.

But faith is evidenced, NOT only by good deeds – they are a dime a dozen and anybody can do them. Faith is believing and trusting in God and moving out from there.

It's like the old example of the circus performer who stood at the edge of Niagara Falls with the tightrope stretched out before him and a wheelbarrow in his hands. He asked the spectators if they believed him when he said he could push a wheelbarrow across to the other side. They enthusiastically cheered, “YES!”

“Alright,” he replied. “Can I have a volunteer to get in the wheelbarrow?”

Well, faith isn't just believing that he could make it across. Faith is getting IN the wheelbarrow.

The Bible tells us that our source (where we come from) and our goal (where we are going) while “unseen” is not “nameless.”

God does indeed tell us “where to go” (so to speak).
God does tell us what the Christian life looks like.
God does tell us what it means to follow Jesus.
God does tell us what the church should be all about,
And how we should spend our time and our money.

How we get there? Well that's for us to figure out. That's where faith comes in and where the community of faith, all of us journeying together, comes in.

In the weeks to come, we'll look more closely at what faith does, who we have our faith in, and what it looks like.

But we start from the position that faith is the ONLY accurate approach to the future. We step out into the unknown every day of our lives. We don't know what the future will hold for even one day. Faith is that stepping-out process.

After all, the future is really known only to God, and remains a mystery to us. We discern God's call as best we can and then we step out into the unknown. “Faith means saying yes to God without knowing all it involves.” (Walter J. Burghardt, S.J.)

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

As solid as that chair. And you cannot only stand on it, you can bet your life on it.
May we not only believe this, but live it as well. Amen.