

# Sermon

## “Living By Faith - Part One”

A Sermon for First Presbyterian Church

Sunday, August 11, 2019

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Luke 12:32 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

*Luke 12:35 “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. 38 If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.*

*Luke 12:39 “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”*

*Heb. 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the*

*seashore.”*

*Heb. 11:13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.*

**This morning’s passage from Hebrews is a portion of a larger discussion on the nature of faith. The 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter begins with the following verses and they serve to state the underlying convictions of the author about faith. Let me read just those few verses as I begin:**

Heb. 11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

- I. I wonder if everyone is being visited multiple times a week by people proselytizing - (or have I been targeted!)?**
  - A. My neighborhood has begun to feel like a targeted community**
  - B. Pairs of people of faith arriving each week to**
    - 1. “Share some scripture...”**
    - 2. Check on the disposition of our souls**
    - 3. Pitch faith.**
  - C. I hope that you can forgive me for saying I find**

**these visits really annoying...**

- 1. I try very hard to mask my irritation and to send these people on their way with a blessing**
  - 2. But I often close the door and go back to whatever I was doing thinking, “If they really wanted to be kind to me . . . they would leave me alone.”**
- D. And to their credit, at least thus far, they have all been kind people, polite in every way, and not coercive at all — which I am glad to see.**
- E. Greenville, NC — sending the visitors to my neighbor - Bill.**

**II. I’ve been thinking about the visitors to my home and Faith this week.**

- A. The letter to the Hebrews has a long section about the nature of “faith” and we will spend today and next Sunday exploring some of what the author of Hebrews suggests about**
- 1. what faith is and**
  - 2. what it looks like to live by faith.**
- B. The letter is written to a church which, while not suffering the pain and trauma of martyrdom, nevertheless has had members imprisoned, possessions plundered, and in general held in derision by the community around it.**
- C. The heart of the ridicule circled around the fact that the Christians are following a *crucified* Lord.**
- 1. That of course *makes no sense!***
  - 2. You don’t follow “losers.” You follow “winners”**
    - a. Everybody knew that a “Messiah” was**

**supposed to be a winner.**

**3. How stupid it was for Christians to follow someone who lost everything he had (including his life).**

**a. *AND lost everything in a scandalously PUBLIC scene.***

**b. On its face this was foolishness.**

**D. The apostle Paul also wrote about the scandalous nature of the Christian proclamation:**

1Cor. 1:18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

**III. The author of Hebrews writes to encourage & guide**

**A. To *Encourage* because maintaining faith in a world which:**

**1. Does not understand**

**2. Is eager to point out faults and hypocrisies**

**3. And sometimes enjoys ridiculing those who would accept as true and real things which others do not see and/or know.**

**All these turn the daily experience of faith into a**

**test of endurance.**

**4. We might be at the beginning of a new era when, in our own time, people of faith will know first-hand what the author of Hebrews is talking about.**

**a. Voices not only of questioning but also of downright hostility are growing in number and in impact in the modern world.**

† **Christopher Hitchens,**

† **Sam Harris,**

† **Richard Dawkins *et al.***

**B. It is also written to *guide* because how we are to respond to a world that is usually indifferent and occasionally angry with people of faith is an important issue.**

**1. At the heart of Christian conviction is the idea that in Jesus we are given a “Way” and a “truth,” and a “life” that leads us to fullness of joy and peace.**

**2. We are people who have come to trust that if we will follow Jesus in the way he lived we will have life, and it abundantly.**

**III. So, what does the Letter to the Hebrews suggest?**

**A. That what we hope for and the faith in which we live are closely (mysteriously?) connected.**

**1. We tend to become the things we pursue.**

**2. Living in hope is living with hands open**

**3. A posture of trust & of patience**

**4. If we hope for communion with God . . .**

**5. If we hope for a workable human community**

shaped by neighborly kindness and justice...

6. If we hope to be better people today than we were yesterday (more loving, more patient, more wise, more compassionate, *et cetera*) . . .

Living in hopefulness about these things leads us to join with God in accomplishing them.

- B. It is true that very often our hopes will seem like Pollyannaish nonsense to the “realists” of our age
  1. who can easily point to the many ways not only the world at large, but the church itself is participating in systems which are not kind or just.
  2. That is why we experience faith as a “conviction of things not seen.”

**IV. Hebrews offers Abraham and Sarah as examples of what it looks like to live by faith.**

**A. First-off if we go back and read the narratives of Abraham and Sarah beginning with Genesis 12**

1. We will notice immediately that they are complicated characters!
  - a. Sometimes showing remarkable trust in God . . .
  - b. But also showing little or no trust in God too . . .
  - c. Sometimes showing lives of petty and self-serving inclinations . . .
  - d. Sometimes living in a kind of selfless generosity toward strangers who turn out to be angels.

**B. Hebrews tends to speak only to the parts of the**

**story of Abraham and Sarah when they got it right . . .**

**C. but if we consider a more wholistic view . . . we might be encouraged that if God can use people like *them* well, maybe God can also use people like *us* too!**

**V. So what are the attributes Hebrews lifts up?**

**A. They left “home” not knowing where God was taking them . . . this might lead us to get out of our settled places and risk the adventure of seeking God in unexpected places.**

**B. They lived as aliens in a land that was not their own**  
**1. They had been promised a place of their own but when they got there it was already occupied — thus they were forced to learn to be neighbors with others.**

**C. And perhaps the most obvious (and humorous) of the examples — They trusted that they would have children . . .**

**1. Even though he was so old he was “one as good as dead.”**

**2. And even though Sarah was barren and past the age of menopause . . .**

**D. It was manifest nonsense for them to keep believing that God would provide a child year after year and decade after decade as the promise lingered unfulfilled . . .**

**1. And yet, they somehow learned to live hopefully even in the face of all the evidence that God was not reliable and the promise would not be fulfilled.**

- VI. This way of living where we trust more in God and God's promises which are often too subtle and too delayed to be seen . . .**
- A. It will always offer easy ammunition to those who would ridicule.**
  - B. And yet, this counterintuitive way of being in the world — we are convinced — is the way that Jesus walked.**
    - 1. It is a way which leads us to not grow weary in doing what is right**
    - 2. It is a way which offers peace to those who walk it.**
    - 3. It is the way that God will slowly but surely make good on the vision of a kingdom on earth which mirrors the kingdom of heaven.**
  - C. But we should not be naive about this way of Jesus**
    - 1. It is not easy to choose**
    - 2. It will put us at odds with the world**
    - 3. It will ask much of us**
  - D. Even so, this way is “the way, the truth, and the life.”**