

August 11, 2013
First Presbyterian Church – Independence, MO
Sermon: Priority One
Rev. Melissa A. Bowers

Hebrews 11:1-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 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.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith. 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. 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. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 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.

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." 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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 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.

Sermon: Priority One

I want to begin this morning by telling you a joke. A pastor and his wife had agreed to a strict budget plan. One day the wife came home with a lovely, expensive looking dress on. Her clergyman husband exclaimed in disappointment that she had broken their vow. She comforted him saying, "I didn't intend to buy it but the store clerk said it looked so good on me, and so did passers by in the store. And so I wore it back to work and on the way people on the street stopped me to say how good it looked, and then at work everyone said the same thing!" Her husband, still disappointed, said, "But darling, why didn't you say 'get thee behind me, Satan'!" And she said, "Oh, but I did say that, and Satan got behind me and he said it looks good from back there too!"

We like to make decisions, commitments, vows, and promises often in an attempt to achieve security by warding off change. Human beings like to feel secure, and that often means to us being right, and we will often forego happiness, peace of mind, and sometimes even sanity in order to maintain the illusion that we are right, that what was true yesterday is still true today even if circumstances have changed or if WE have changed. We can all relate to Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof. Too much change too fast can be more than stressful – it can threaten our sanity. In fact, this week PBR covered the "new measure" of intelligence – the new black beyond the classic IQ measurement of intelligence is adaptation.

Who has taken an IQ test? It measures our ability to recall and apply data. This new measure is different – it's based on how well we adapt to change. How quickly we move away from trying to fit new circumstances into our understanding, and instead adjust our understanding to the new circumstances. But it's really tough to do, because sameness – being right - it seems to give us a sense of security that we all crave – the desire to hang on to one true thing that will be our rock, our foundation, when the seas of life around move from calm and bright to dark and stormy.

But the truth is, we don't know what we should or will do in any given situation – we can project and suppose, we can preach and promise, but we don't really know until we get there. And.....we shouldn't know. We shouldn't try to know. We shouldn't try to lock in particular actions or outcomes. We should be ready for anything, and calm and confident and satisfied in ALL circumstances. ***Because that's what faith is.***

Faith is the word we use when we are referring to the nature of our true relationship with God. Faith describes the awareness and openness, the trust, the readiness to hear and respond to direction of the Divine in our lives – even when it directs us to behave differently than we thought we would – or should. Faith is the inner compass that is never broken, but that sometimes becomes hidden or masked when we give too much of our attention to fear, anxiety, self centeredness, resentment, anger and apathy. Faith doesn't have to be created by us – only discovered in us and strengthened by the daily choices we make.

You know, the most holy site in the world – the Temple Mount which is the foundation spot for three of the world's great religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – was made holy by the demonstration of ultimate faith. This spot is traditionally believed to be Mount Moriah, where God told Abraham to take his most beloved son - the most precious thing to him ever – and lay him down before God as a holy sacrifice. Now fortunately this Bible story has a salvific ending as God sends an angel to hold the knife just before Abraham plunges it into Isaac's heart, and then provides a perfect animal to be used as sacrifice instead. I've always been a little reluctant to share this story with little ones who still understand things very literally, because it's a scary story – but the implication is clear.

Faith means listening, hearing, and following Divine direction even when we are being led away from places we want to be, into places we don't want to be, and even into places that we think we shouldn't be. Places that feel dangerous – places that stimulate our fear, and challenge our personal fortitude.

So faith is a state of mind - Faith is not a set of beliefs or doctrines – its not a synonym for a particular religion – Faith is a living, growing, deep and intimate and authentic relationship with the Divine. It is assurance and conviction of who we are, and whose we are. Faith is the pathway to God, and it opens us up to be in filled with more Peace, Love, and Grace than we can even imagine. Faith is the connection that's never broken, even when it's hidden by stress, grief, anxiety, and hopelessness. Faith is always still present and alive in us, ready to be uncovered and then lived through in this experience that we call earth life.

Jesus' life – both human and divine - demonstrates for us what it looks like to live fully in faith, unafraid, able to speak with love and compassion, with deep wisdom and great simplicity, and with brutal honesty and razor sharp truth when necessary. He lived in this kingdom, from this kingdom, that he describes so often – NOT a place, but a state of consciousness, a realm of the divine that he brought with him into earth life because of his faith – his relationship with the Creator.

So these scriptures describe to us what it is like living from an awareness of the kingdom – the kingdom that Jesus describes in Luke 17 as being “within you”. The kingdom is not a thing or place – it's within you as a state of consciousness, of understanding, that keeps you connected to God and therefore grounded in your life in a very deep and whole way. A way that keeps you from being overinvested in your things – a way keeps you tuned in to the needs and even suffering of others and causes you to reach out, to ease burdens. Faith connects you to hope so that you stop worrying about your own welfare, but never stop working for the day when none of God's children lack for life's basic needs. Faith keeps you from giving in to hopelessness and apathy, and letting resentment and anger ravage your spirit. Because faith is the substance – the foundation – the beginning, or first step – of the abundance, peace, and good will that we hope for – that we expect to one day be a way of life for all people. But it starts with our own journey!.....

I encountered a wonderful story, a true story, shared by Eben Alexander called Proof of Heaven. Eben has been a successful neurosurgeon for over 25 years, including 15 years at Harvard

Medical School. He's an exemplary person – a faithful husband and father, mildly practicing Episcopalian, and staunch believer in the things that science can prove. He contracted a very dangerous form of e coli and was in a coma for over a month. During that time he encountered worlds and persons and awarenesses far beyond the material, including coming face to face with his very deepest fears.

And in book he takes us through his journey from fear into overwhelming faith, and describes how he came to know this deep and comforting truth – **that our spiritual self is more real than anything we can perceive in this physical realm, and has a divine connection to the infinite love of the Creator.** He says, *“when I finally went back to church, everywhere I turned in this place that had failed to move me much before, I encountered art and music that brought it all back, and I recalled the bliss of infinite unconditional love that I had experienced there. At last, I understood what religion was really all about, or was supposed to be about. I didn't just believe in God, I knew God. As I approached the altar to take Communion, tears streamed down my cheeks.”*

So the quality of our spiritual lives is not measured in acquired skills or personal righteousness, or even in how much (or little) our faith communities looks up to us. Its not measured in how much we give, or (for Presbyterians) how many committees we are active in, but our spiritual progress is determined by how much we live in and from our faith – how completely our lives are lived from the intimate communion that we feel and practice with our Creator. That sense of being fully enfolded in the will and Presence of God **is faith** - that IS the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Let's pray.....God we thank you for your direction and teaching in scripture, even when it is hard to understand and challenges our comfortable convictions. Help us to seek you in all circumstances, so that finally we see beyond the circumstances and into your very heart. Help us to know your unshakeable Presence with us in every moment, help us to practice your Presence as we talk with you and listen to you like we would a deeply trusted friend, and help us to live in confidence and assurance rather than fear and worry, for this is Faith. Amen.