

Rev. Tim Boeve – 8.11.2019

## Hebrews 11

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 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.

## **How Shall We Then Live?**

Before sharing my message with you, I wanted to take a minute to say how happy I am to be here with you. I have missed your fellowship and it feels good to be back here with you all. I am especially happy that May, who lives in Berkeley, could join me today (at the very least, if you get nothing out of my message, it's worth it just having her here, in my humble opinion) and I want to extend my wife's Noris' greetings to you all as well, as she holds down the fort back at our home in Ajijic, along the shores of Lake Chapala in Mexico.

A few months ago, I received a call from an acquaintance who asked if I would be available to officiate his wedding, which occurred a week ago today, here in

Sonoma. I told him I would be happy to do that, but that I was now living in Mexico, which came as a surprise to him. I also told him that I love to have an excuse to get back here, in fact I was looking for one, because I really wanted to attend a silent retreat, which starts this coming Wednesday at Santa Sabina in San Rafael, but to be sure that this was what some people refer to as a “God thing” (something with a little more significance beyond just my wanting to get back here) that committing to his wedding would be contingent upon whether he was able to help me meet my travel expenses and whether I could fill the pulpit here this Sunday. Well, I am very glad that Curran thought that my offer to do so was OK, so here I am to talk with you this morning on **the subject of faith**.

According to the unidentified author of this letter to the Hebrews, *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.”* In a way my being here was a step of this kind of faith, that is, in my saying “yes” to performing this wedding and committing myself to attending the retreat later this week, and being here with you this morning that I was, and am, **hoping** that something positive was going to come of all this, something positive for me: That, I can assure you has already happened and I still have my retreat to look forward to. Then, of course, I was hoping for **something good** for the wedding couple: Well they are now very happily living as husband and wife living in the bonds of holy matrimony and have told me they were really pleased with the ceremony. And now hopefully **something positive and good** will happen here for us during the unfolding of these next several minutes.

Now, I will be the first to admit that these examples don't rise very high on the level of importance in the whole scheme of things. However, they are important to me and so **my faith** in what I hoped would be the unseen and unknown outcome of this trip caused me quite simply **to purchase** airline tickets, without knowing exactly what my stipend for officiating the wedding would be, and to **make a deposit** on the retreat and **to email Curran** about being in front of you this morning. In other words, **I took action on my faith**, and if you look at all the examples that the writer of Hebrews listed in the full chapter of which, in our selected reading, we have only a couple of examples, that of Abraham and Sarah, but in the full chapter, there are a dozen or so examples of men and women of old who took some form of action based on what they believed about the nature of God and what they felt God was calling them as individuals to do.

The writer concludes that these people didn't in most cases actually receive the positive results that they hoped for, at least not in their lifetime, rather, the author says they saw the reward for their faith from afar, with the classic examples of Moses, seeing the promised land of Canaan, but never being able to enter it himself, and of course Abraham and Sarah bearing a son in their ripe old ages and not ever seeing the generations that they were promised would follow in the wake of Isaac's birth. I have a feeling that we prefer to have our faith rewarded within our own lifespan, and within our own preferred time span, as in my case. Nothing wrong with that! But there is no guarantee that what or whom we place our faith in will be rewarded in this lifetime, as we shall see.

**So, the terrain of this message is based on the premise that faith is something more than just a belief in something or someone; that faith actually moves you and I to take some form of action. The writer of the Book of James in the NT**

**goes so far as to say that *faith without works, that it is to say faith that doesn't cause us to do something, is dead, it yields nothing!***

So, faith results in action, at least the faith under our consideration here.

### **What else can we say about faith?**

Well, we have four summary statements about faith in our liturgy this morning under the *Food for Thought* part of our service. Statements that I didn't put there, but were inserted into the liturgy by Curran, without her knowing that I would feel compelled to organize my thoughts this morning around these statements.

### **Martin Luther King Jr.**

The statement by MLK Jr. most closely resembles the present discussion: "***Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.***" Purchasing an airline ticket, putting a deposit down on a retreat are actions steps. It is faith at work. In the much more significant example—by many, many factors—of MLK, His faith issued forth with the belief that true equality for all people was worth giving his life to and was worth fighting for with heroic acts of civil disobedience. As you know, his life was taken from him far too early for him to see his faith fully realized.

Though much came about by his climbing up the stairway that his faith inspired, like the passage of the **civil rights act in 1964**, less than a year after his "I have a dream" speech, the full fruition of his dream and his faith has yet to be realized: Many places in our nation are still sweltering under the "oppressive heat of injustice," and have a long ways to go before being experienced as "[oases] of freedom and justice." King wasn't able to see our first African American elected to

the highest office in the land—a giant step forward in his dream for full equality. And yet now his dream and his faith appear to be under assault in many parts of this country. Not to minimize the virulence of racism that continues to persist in the world, and that has now manifested in the anti-immigration movements in our country and other places by those propelled by their own fear, which is the true enemy of faith and love, but they will not succeed in destroying the dream of MLK, or in diminishing the faith that millions like him carry in their hearts.

### **Kahlil Gibran**

The author of the famed *The Prophet*, a bestselling book, beloved the world over, Kahlil Gibran's words "***Faith is a knowledge within the heart, beyond the reach of proof***" is absolutely essential to understanding how faith works. Faith is always born in the heart, no matter what or who the focus of our faith is. Faith is always an inside job. It is born from desire--the desire for good things, for noble things, for peace for love. And these desires I think we all hold in common.

I am sorry to say much of what we see in the world today does not reflect those desires. Instead we see a world that is engulfed in fear and suspicion and racism and greed, at least that is what the media would have us believe so I guess it must be true. And yet when we look inside our deepest selves, when we are quiet enough and still enough to really experience the inner most depth of our being, what is there? Even when you take the simple act of stopping and being aware of inhaling a deep breath, what happens inside you? What do you find? There is something present in you deeper than your anxious thoughts, something more real

than any headline or news feed. Inside everyone of us is a place of peace, of inclusion, of love, of joy.

I ask you, does our instinctual love for blue skies, puffy clouds, flowing streams, majestic trees and colorful flowers ever disappear, does our delight in looking at the face of a little baby (or a puppy or kitten for that matter) ever become diminished? Does the smile from a passer-by ever cease to soften our own demeanor? Does a kindness done for us go unappreciated?

I believe faith, true faith, is born not outside of our selves but rather springs forth from our truest deepest selves. **Care for that part of you first and foremost, nurture that, trust that!**

**Ellie Wiesel**

*“The opposite of faith is not doubt, it's indifference,”* said author, philosopher and philanthropist **Ellie Wiesel** who endured the brutality of a Nazi concentration camp and bore witness to this horrific genocide through much of his career. **Yes**, faith springs up in our hearts when we are open to the world around us and to the best that humans can be. How can we not be responsive to the beauty of a sunny day or to the acts of kindness that are all around us. Yet, in Wiesel's case his faith survived in a world that displayed the very worst that humans can be, but he refused to be indifferent to what he saw. Indifference means closing off our hearts to what life brings, whether good or bad, whether sweet or bitter. Indifference is to close our hearts to the wonder of life and the presence of God in the midst of it all. Wiesel's faith stayed aflame even in the midst of the worst of

human suffering and degradation. Because of what endured inside of him he was able to find true humanity in the place one would least expect it.

If we are too self-centered to notice the world around us and the depth within our own selves, it becomes all too easy to ignore the pain of the world in pursuit of our own private agendas. True faith does not let this happen. Right now, the earth is calling for our attention, like never before. We all know that for far too long much of humanity has lived in a state of indifference to the impending climate crisis that we are all facing.

Fortunately, there are growing signs that **finally at this late hour** many are awakening to the crisis of our planet and to its endangered species and to the extreme peril facing those multitudes living near low-lying coastal areas. Somewhere along the way we lost sight that we as individuals have a role to play in being wise stewards of our planet, and we have left it to younger generations to undo the harm that our generation and former ones have caused. That has to change, and it is slowly changing. We can all do our part to help others see that we have to work together as never before to address this crisis.

### **Madeleine L'Engle**

Finally, we have **Madeleine L'Engle**, the inspirational author, whose writings were informed by her Christian faith and by her love of science and, who, by the way, received over 30 rejections before her most famous novel, "A Wrinkle in Time" was accepted for publication. She wrote, "**Some things have to be believed to be seen.**" Because she believed she had something to say, and that writing was her conveyance for doing so, she persevered and lived to see her writings impact untold numbers of readers.

*Some things have to be believed to be seen* begs the question, what do **we** believe about **ourselves**? Do we believe we're just here to enjoy the good life, and find contentment in consuming what life has to offer? I think not, we may fall into that stupor from time-to-time, but by virtue of the fact that you are here this morning, you must realize that life has other dimensions than just "*what's in it for me?*" We all have something to give back. This earth has birthed us and nurtured us, fed us and clothed us it has given us the richest of possible experiences, such beauty, such grandeur.

We were born for this moment in the history of our planet. Why do I say this? Simply for the reason that we *are here* living at this time---alive during the most perilous time in human history more perilous even than during the two world wars of the last century. Scientists tell us that the time we have to turn things around and reduce the amount of carbon and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is growing shorter and shorter. I think most, if not all of you know these things, and as people of faith, we are not able to be indifferent about this situation. And so, as many of you are already doing we all must also take this knowledge of what scientists are repeatedly telling us about the climate crisis and to everything within our own means to help. "*I'm just one person, what I can do,*" you say.

Here are two immediate suggestions, actions steps, if you will:

Go out and get this book by Terry Patten, **A New Republic of the Heart**. It clearly lays out the challenges before us and provides a positive full-of-faith way of working to meet these challenges. I can't recommend it highly enough.



And another very participatory way of doing so is to join in the world-wide Strike that climate organizations such as 350.org are calling for, which is taking place on September 20, I don't know if one is being organized here in Sonoma, but I'm sure it will be. This called-for strike was inspired, as you probably know by the actions of a nine grader (well she's in 10<sup>th</sup> grade now) in Sweden, **Greta Thunberg**.

I wonder if Greta, gave much thought to what her simple act of staying away from school on behalf of the climate would inspire around the world. She said her inspiration came from other teenagers living in Florida who organized the **March for our Lives** to prevent more gun violence, after a shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida.

We think we can't make a difference, but that is a lie! Maybe sometimes we use that excuse because we are feeling unsure of what to do, or our nameless anxieties rise up and make us feel paralyzed, I sure know these feelings. Many of us are in the Abraham and Sarah stage of our lives. Feeling like we are--as the writer of Hebrews quipped "as good as dead." Well, it doesn't look like anyone is dead here.

So, let's move forth in faith, not held back by our fears. Be inspired by your love for this world and for its inhabitants all creatures great and small, take steps up the stairway to full freedom and equality for all people, keep working to transform yourselves and our world. We will accomplish things we can't yet see, and hardly believe to be possible. Full of faith, full of hope, full of love. **Amen**.