

Practicing Faith

A sermon offered by Ruth Hopkins
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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 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.

In our reading from the letter to the Hebrews, the author is giving his readers the message to keep the faith. The congregation that received this letter was under probably being harassed by the authorities for their beliefs, and things were probably only going to get worse. Worse like martyrdom.

I say "probably" because there is a lot about the letter of Hebrews that we just can't be sure of. We are fairly certain that the letter was directed to a congregation of Jewish-Christians, but we're not sure about the actual date or even location of this congregation. We are fairly certain Paul did not write it – he had his own style, and was prone to writing at least a portion of his letters in his own handwriting. Even the great church father Origen, when asked about the authorship of Hebrews, said, "God only knows who wrote it."

But Hebrews has its charm, no matter who wrote it and who read it. It has one of the most memorable definitions of faith. It is the book to read when you feel a bit defeated, tired, and persecuted. When you need a bit of "rah rah" to keep going. Keeping the faith then, and keeping it now is not easy. It helps to have some cheerleading, some reminding that keeping the faith is worth it.

We often talk about it as if it something we are bestowed with, as in "keeping the faith" or "she has so much faith" as if it's a gift or talent given at birth. Our faith is tested, we almost lose our faith. We use the word "faith" to describe what we believe.

We often talk about faith as if it is just staying positive. We confuse it with optimism. We think we are being faithful when we hope for the best. Often, when something we don't understand happens to us – our faith is tested, or we lose it altogether.

Death especially can do that to faith – rip it up, and leave it in pieces. It is one thing to have faith that the sun will rise tomorrow, quite another when you're sitting by the bed of a dying friend, praying desperately, not that the sun will rise, but that your loved one will live to see the sun one more day.

Friday was the birthday of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, famous poet. If you can't quite remember any of his poems off the top of your head, you may remember some of his famous lines, "Tis better to have loved and lost/ Than never to have loved at all." Many consider his finest work to be the poem written for his best friend, Arthur Hallem, whom he'd known since college days. Hallem was engaged to Tennyson's sister, but died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage. Tennyson grieved for decades, and for long periods lived in deep despair. The death of this beloved friend shook his faith profoundly. He wrote, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds."

Sometimes it is that honest doubt that brings us back. Sometimes we have to face squarely our fear of the unknown. Often we find the darkness only dark. Like walking into a pitch-black room, once we calm down, realize there are no monsters lurking, we can take the small steps that bring us some grounding, we can make out some shapes in the darkness. Somehow we begin to find our way, somehow after the doubt, faith returns, stronger than ever. I don't know why, or how. I guess you could say I have faith.

But while having faith is good, practicing faith is better. And more challenging. All too often, without the action to back it up, faith can become just another intellectual exercise. We think one way, but act another, or we don't act at all.

I know that the world is full of injustice. I can see with my own eyes a world of war and hatred. But I can imagine a world of peace. I can see a promised land of equality and love. But to practice faith, I must live a peaceful life of my own, work for peace, give my money to peace efforts, and pray for reconciliation. I can live as if God's realm is true, worth fighting for, worth living for.

So many faithful, courageous people have gone before us, and through their simple acts of practicing faith, change the landscape for everybody that follows. It is these acts of faith that we remember. We remember Rosa Parks, claiming her seat on the bus, daring to live out equality before it was a reality. We remember the Tiananmen Square's "tank man" – and the enduring image of one man staring down four Chinese tanks.

We see everyday, brave people living their faith, practicing their faith, as they take to the streets for immigration, marriage equality, and peace. No great arm of God will pierce the sky and move justice and peace and love through this world, we do this when we practice what we believe, when we practice faith.

One of my dear friends is in the process of becoming an Episcopal priest. She has a husband and an 11-year old son. Because she must take special Episcopal classes, a year and a half ago she moved her entire family to New York so she could attend the Episcopal seminary and fulfill her requirements. She left a spacious Kettering home for a 900 sq foot apartment. Her husband left a stable job, not knowing if he would find work in a new city. Her son left his friends, his school, the only home he'd ever known. When she told me her plans, I sat with my mouth hanging open. My mind was screaming, "How will you live? How will your husband find a job? What about your son? How can you possibly afford it?" There were so many unknowns. She confessed to being very scared, but said, I have to do this, I really think God is in here somewhere. God BETTER BE in here somewhere."

Yes – God better be in there, somewhere. The practice of faith is living as if God is around, making your everyday choices counting on the belief that God better be in there somewhere.

This church has a pretty good history of doing practicing faith. I have heard many of you speak of the early years, the storefront, the struggles this church has had. But there was a vision that you all shared, and that vision gave you the courage to keep stepping forward in faith. Out of the storefront, into a new building. Not just wishing for a new church, but building one. Not just wishing and hoping for justice, but living out the vision, the promise of God's kingdom here on earth. It is a scary business, living out what you believe. Those of you that were there in the beginning might admit to some fear, but what I hear in your stories is faith.

Practicing faith is the entire reason this church exists. It's the reason we decide to have a food pantry once a month. The reason we host a Vacation Bible School, discuss books, worship together. We see a promised land of our own, we have a beloved community of love that we cherish and that sustains us. We envision a future, even as we work to make it so.

We as a church are at another crucial moment in our life together. In a few weeks we will meet as a congregation to plan our future. We will be asked to look ahead, and have some serious conversations about where we're going, and how we're going to get there. There is talk of change, growth, vision.

It is tempting to get caught up in the fears that go along with such changes. Fears about money. Fears about growth. Fear of the future. The practice of faith engages the fear, and allows us to move through it. We are bound to each other in God. We have covenanted to face the future together, to talk together, to live our faith together.

And while we are not faced with the kind of persecution like the congregation of Hebrews, in these dog days of summer, we could use of bit of "rah rah" for the journey. As we plan our future together, as we talk vision, let's remember faith. Let's plant seeds of faith, let's live our faith. Let's keep showing the world that God is here somewhere.