

“Faith Is...”

Luke 12: 32-40, Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

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I am trying to finish reading the book, “The Faith Club,” in the hopes that a group of people might join me in reading and discussing it in September. I have mentioned this book before. It chronicles the spiritual journey of three women, a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim. In the chapter entitled, “Could You Convert?” Ranya, the Muslim woman, says, “As Priscilla, Suzanne, and I continued our discussions, we were not only talking about three different religions, but we were also talking about three personal and entirely different relationships with our own religions. At that time, I told Priscilla and Suzanne that it often felt like I had faith but no religion, that Priscilla had religion but no faith, and that Suzanne had both.” Suzanne, the Christian woman, had both religion and faith. So what do you think the difference is between religion and faith? Today’s lesson from Hebrews helps us to consider what faith is, not only for our spiritual ancestors but us as well.

The passage begins with one of the most poetic and enigmatic statements in Scripture, “*faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Has anyone from another faith tradition or even a nonbeliever ever asked you to “define” the word faith? So, what is faith? What does faith mean to you? I know it is not the easiest thing to talk about. You know it when you have it but you don’t quite know how to describe it to someone else. If you have ever worked with a confirmation student you know how most of them agonize over writing their faith statement. It’s not good enough, it’s not long enough, and I can’t say it the right way. We have all heard someone say something like “he has a strong faith” or “don’t worry, her faith will get her through this.” Faith is a noun, it is something you have to one degree or another, but faith is also a verb. There are moments in our lives when it may feel as though our faith is slipping away. Then something reminds us that faith isn’t something we have or don’t have, it is a relationship with the Holy that like all relationships ebbs and flows, waxes and wanes throughout our lives.

Faith is more like a state of being; of being in relationship with God and God’s creation. One might know you have faith by the way you live, the way you respond to certain circumstances, the attitude you demonstrate when you face adversity or conversely great joy. You can see evidence of

one's faith by the priorities you set in life. What is truly important to you? What brings you great joy or great angst? What worries you the most and how do you handle these stressors in your life? Your faith will likely lead you to act a certain way. You may be impelled to speak out against some great injustice or stand in solidarity with others who are the victims of persecution. You might ask a friend who is facing a difficult time if you could pray for them.

The early Christians to whom this letter was written were experiencing difficult times. They were likely second generation Christians who were persecuted because of their faith. They were standing at a crossroads. Would they continue to follow Jesus Christ and suffer the consequences, or should they abandon their faith or return to Judaism as an alternative? Being a Christian did not make their lives easier as they may have supposed. Instead, believing in Jesus Christ was risky business. How ironic then, that to a group of followers anxious for some tangible evidence that would solidify their faith and calm their fears, comes this enigmatic declaration, "*faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*"

We are not unlike those early Christians. We pray to God for guidance or wisdom and instead of stopping there and trusting in God to respond, we press God for a sign or some proof that God is paying attention. Show me, God, that you have heard me and point me in the right direction. Instead, we hear these words spoken to us, "*faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*" Assurance and conviction; two essential words of faith. Faith is not about insisting on signs but trusting that a way will be revealed to us, in God's time and in God's way. We see the world one way and God will help us see it in an entirely different way.

We don't always do well with things we can not yet see. Perhaps it was easier for our ancestors to live by faith, to fight the compulsion to look for some proof or tangible signs. We post modern people think there is nothing we can not see. We create instruments to see the tiniest organisms. We have telescopes that allow us to see into the farthest reaches of the universe. We have ultrasounds and MRI machines to help us pinpoint illness in the most remote corners of the human body. None of these instruments however, will help us in our life of faith. Faith is about seeing in an entirely different way and having hope even when there are things we can not see.

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

Growing up, many of us believed that faith was measured by one’s ability to quote chapter and verse of scripture or memorize certain prayers or creeds quickly and accurately or believing that every word of scripture came directly from God. If you could do these things or believe these things then you must be a very faithful person. We have often thought that having faith meant assenting to some intellectual propositions. Do you believe there is a God? Do you believe that God is the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of all creation, of humanity, of us? Do you believe this or that about the Bible or the teachings of the church throughout the ages? If you do not believe all these things, do you then not have faith? The writer of this letter says faith is not about believing in something, but trusting in someone.

Faith, as used by the author of Hebrews, is much more than belief that there is a God or belief in something that is written about God. The writer and theologian Frederick Buechner in his book, *Secrets in the Dark*, says “By faith we understand, if we are to understand it at all, that the madness and lostness we see all around us and within us are not the last truth about the world but only the next to the last truth... Faith is the eye of the heart, and by faith we see deep down beneath the face of things—by faith we struggle against all odds to be able to see—that the world is God’s creation even so. It is he who made us and not we ourselves, made us out of his peace to live in peace, out of his light to dwell in light, out of his love to be above all things loved and loving. That is the last truth about the world.”

Faith is the eye of the heart helping us to see below and beyond what seems obvious to the world. It is how we understand what the world does not seem to understand. Faith is what helps us find our place in the world when others would prefer to subscribe it for us. When we have faith, when we can see things from the eye of the heart, everything looks different. It is not so much that we have faith, but that we live *by* faith, *in* faith, *because* of faith. This does not mean that we will be immune from suffering or sin. Having faith does not insure that we won’t make mistakes or that we will receive and follow God’s will any better. After all, the writer lifts up the example of Abraham and Sarah as the great models of faith and they certainly had their moments of unfaithful behavior.

Abraham and Sarah teach us that faith means saying yes to God without knowing all that it involves. In fact, that is what the unseen is all about. *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* Faith and hope are inseparable. When it seems as though all hope is gone, our faith may also appear to have dwindled to a mere flicker. Then, in our darkness, along comes a light that brings us to where we need to go. This faith we love, but don’t always understand, is a gift that has been entrusted to us by our spiritual ancestors. It is the promise that we are God’s, conceived in love and intended to be love to the world. It is faith that allows us to live into God’s promise of new life, to accept the promise that God will never leave nor forsake us, that no evil can ever destroy us, that in fact, death is never the final answer. So often, we allow ourselves to be defined by what Buechner calls the “next to last truth,” rather than trusting that in fact that God “made us out of [God’s] peace to live in peace, out of [God’s] light to dwell in light, out of [God’s] love to be above all things loved and loving.”

Our God is always calling us into new life, into the yet to be revealed future. There is always the promise of a new day that will not and can not be exactly like the one we have just experienced. We are encouraged by the example of our foremothers and fathers in the faith, but we can not live in their shadow. We can not live the life they have lived; we can only be inspired by their faithfulness. Faith keeps moving us forward trusting that God will keep God’s promises. Faith is a wondrous journey each moment teaching us something different, leading us to places we may never have been. Faith is not about the destination but rather appreciating the journey itself.

Finally, Frederick Buechner says this about faith. “Faith is different from theology because theology is reasoned, systematic, and orderly, whereas faith is disorderly, intermittent, and full of surprises....Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a position on than a movement toward, less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting.” (Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons.) Perhaps that is what keeps us going even through the darkness. We wait, we wonder and we believe. Because we have come to truly trust that *“faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* May it be so! Amen