

Sermon

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St. John the Evangelist

8/7/15

Proper 14 (C): Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

In our first reading this morning, a portion of chapter 11 from the letter to the Hebrews, we get the famous definition of “faith.” “Faith,” the author writes, is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” I like this definition a lot, not just because it is brief and easy to remember, which is always nice, but also because it encapsulates the layered qualities of faith.

First, we have “the assurance of things hoped for.” This lets us know that hope is an essential element to faith. But it doesn’t necessarily mean religious faith. For example, this past week I was driving on the highway and up in front of me there was a car that was obviously in a rush to get where they were going. And at one point, as this driver impatiently tried to switch lanes to pass someone on the right, a car from the right lane was moving left. They missed each other by inches. After I stopped cursing this crazy driver, I reflected on just how much faith it takes to drive on the highway. Faith that people will obey the rules. Faith that someone won’t come swerving into my lane at 80mph to kill me. Driving on the highway is one thing we can only do on the “assurance of things hoped for.” Those things that you’re hoping for, in this example, being not dying in an accident.

When we move onto “the conviction of things not seen,” though we are starting to get a little more into the realm of religion. To have conviction is to have a feeling that convinces you of something, but in this case that something is unseen, which complicates things a bit. We depend a lot on what is seen in order to be able to prove things exist. And yet most people have a notion that there is more out there in this world than meets the eye. It can be hard to say why, or how they know this, but that conviction is widespread and is the beginnings of what we might call “faith” in something else we might call, “God.” And yet that something is not easily realized or recognized. It remains beyond us in time and space.

Like I said, this conviction of things not seen is a solid starting point for our faith. But if you’re a quantum physicist, you might tell me that scientifically we’ve known for years that reality, *as we perceive it*, is only a tiny sliver of reality as it exists on a particle level. The sensory world is a minute percentage of the world *beyond* our senses. And this world beyond our senses is actually quite weird, some might say miraculous. Rules like time and space and causality that we hold so sacred in our quasi-reality actually aren’t rules at all at that level. Electrons are both stationary and in motion at once, they can appear in two places at the same time. In short: the majority of reality we cannot and do not experience. And the majority of reality does not abide by the basic physical principles we hold to be self-evident. This is science saying this, not faith. So how is faith different from quantum physics?

To answer that question I think we need to be a little more specific. And for that I stick with the Letter to the Hebrews, but move a little further past the famous opening line, to verse three: “by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God...” Now we’re starting to talk more about a Judeo-Christian faith. And for us, as Christians, who claim Jesus to be the Word of God, present

but not yet in flesh and blood at the beginning of Creation, we are heirs of that tradition. Therefore, Christian faith is more specific than just believing whether there is something out there. Christian faith is even about more than whether God exists or not. Christian faith tells us that God has certain qualities. Christian faith tells us that despite being beyond the confines of this reality, God is in relationship with this world, God has an identity that we can know and experience. Christian faith tells us that the universe cares, and cares about us. And that is not something we are going to be able to prove scientifically.

But just because we can't prove it doesn't mean we are making it up. We do have some resources to back up this claim. We have our own life experiences for sure. But we also have the testimony and witness of those who came before, who God revealed particularly potent truths to. People like Abraham who followed the will of this God across the desert and was rewarded with descendants more numerous than the stars of heaven or the grains of sand on the seashore. We have patriarchs, prophets, saints and apostles. We have the testimony of the disciples who saw Jesus raised from the dead, confirming that he was God incarnate.

If we have faith in these testimonies, that will help ground our faith in something outside our own minds. And it will also mean putting our trust in something that we cannot be completely sure of, in the scientific sense. Because those testimonies show us that faith in God, by definition, requires you to put your trust in something that may or may not work for you. If it's guaranteed to work out, you don't need any faith. It is the act of putting themselves at the mercy of God and believing that that God cared enough about them to provide for them, but without knowing for sure how it would turn out, that made these patriarchs and prophets our forefathers in the faith.

Now if we do decide to have faith, and to have Christian faith specifically, if we are to live with the conviction that the Creator of the universe is as Jesus showed us He is, that will mean doing things that by our normal standards look rather foolish. God, in Christ, calls us to live lives that don't abide by the standards of this world. "Sell your possessions. Give alms. Be ready for the in-breaking of God into this world," Jesus tells us in today's Gospel. All these things are liable to leave you acting a little strange, at least according to people who do not share your same beliefs. The line between faith and folly is very thin and really just depends on where you're standing. That's why faith takes courage. It also takes a willingness to go against the grain. Abraham's legendary faith lead him down some pretty weird roads, as did Noah's, Moses' and even Jesus'. His faith in a loving God lead him to the Cross. What a foolish place for God to end up.

But in choosing to have Christian faith, we are choosing to play by a different set of rules. And this requires us, ultimately to relinquish control of our lives. I don't have to tell you how hard that is to do. Our leaps of faith are often done with a parachute...just in case.

Now when I say we are relinquishing control of our lives, I'm not talking about letting God drive the car for you, or not going to the doctor because you have faith God will heal you without the aid of modern medicine. When I say faith is relinquishing control what I mean is that faith involves us trusting that if we continue to let the principles of scripture, the tenets of the church, the example of Jesus lead us and guide us, **instead** of our own agenda, our own personal, self-serving desires and intuitions, that the we will find happiness, fulfillment, purpose, power, resiliency, and wholeness that way. That's the promise. To be a person of Christian faith is to be willing to be more generous, more loving, and more gracious than you would otherwise be because you have faith that such things will lead to a fuller life. So

the most faithful thing we can say is not “Jesus take the wheel” but “Not my will, but yours be done.” Meaning, Jesus I am willing to suppress my own agenda, my own control over how I think my life should look and instead, on faith, choose your ways. A way of humility. The way of the Cross. Instead of going my own way, I am willing to drop my nets and follow you. Because I have faith that ultimately those ways are more rewarding than the ways of this world.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen and by it we understand the worlds to have been created by the word of God. Together all those things make up the beginnings of Christian faith. Hope, Conviction, and the Word of God, which is Love. This faith teaches us that not only are there unseen forces out there, but that those unseen forces love and care for us and will lead us into all truth. God is more than just a dispassionate energy that set the world in motion. God has a character, a will, a purpose for you. That’s what our faith tells us. That is the promise God has made to us in Jesus Christ. A promise that is nothing less than claiming that the force which created the universe and serves as its heartbeat is love.

It’s a bold claim. And I can’t prove it to you. So I guess you’ll just have to take it on faith.