

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost  
Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40  
August 11, 2013  
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“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Here is one of the few places in the Bible where faith is specifically defined even though the word faith is peppered throughout holy writ.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews goes on to illustrate this definition of faith with several concrete examples beginning with Abraham and Sarah.

This definition suggests that the one who exercises faith has to be motivated and strengthened by things that aren't immediately apparent, and, in fact, beyond any perception by our senses of sight, touch, smell, taste or hearing.

Abraham is called the Father of the Jewish faith because he left his birthplace to journey to an unknown land. Sarah believed, sort of, that she could have a child well after her child-bearing years were long past.

But, we're told, they both died before the fullness of God's promise unfolded.

Later in Hebrews, the author cites Moses, who more than anyone else, labored tirelessly to bring the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt to the promise land. It was Moses who held most tightly to the vision of a land of their own, yet he died before he was able to set one foot in it.

The author of Hebrews equates faith with action based on a serious hunger, a relentless longing for what he calls a “city... whose architect and builder is God,” and “a homeland,” and “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”

Faith, then, according to this author, is active longing with a measure of restlessness in this life for something so much greater.

Jesus calls this “city,” this “homeland,” this “better country” the “Kingdom of God.” And according to Jesus, the Kingdom of God is both present and future – present in a limited way and perfect established in the future. We can have some now and much more later on.

An example for me of the present experience of the Kingdom of God was last week's Reading Camp. A host of volunteers – all ages, male and female with varieties of tasks were all working toward one goal – helping third graders with their reading skills. The volunteers were exceptionally cheerful with one another and equally, if not more so, with the children. The children responded with love, affection, gratitude and courtesy. It was a week-long joy fest. Everyone was giving of themselves and yet receiving so much more in return. Someone said, “Even if the children don't become avid readers, they know a whole lot of people care deeply about them.”

In the kingdom of God, no one is thinking solely about him or herself. Everyone is other directed and pulling together so everyone gets what he or she needs. No one goes without while others have too much. No one went without at Reading Camp. Goodness was flowing in abundance; our cups were running over. One little girl was in tears as her father left with her because she didn't want the camp to be over. Luke's gospel picks up on the definition of faith from Hebrews. Jesus is giving instructions so his followers can gain the kingdom of God presently and yet to come.

Sell possessions and give alms. Practice charity toward everyone in this earthly life as the way of being ready for Jesus' return when the kingdom will be fully realized. Practice active longing. Act as if the kingdom is already here, and it will be more fully.

We were talking about the second coming of Christ last week at our Wednesday Bible Study. We had to ask ourselves if we would be ready or doing what pleased Jesus whenever he came back. I said I hoped he'd come during Reading Camp because we were all engaged in such a wholesome project.

Having said that, Jesus was there in every face.

Luke's gospel reading today challenges us not to compartmentalize our lives into disparate activities or lifestyle decisions that emphasize personal ambition at the expense of service to others.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the practice of charity as a lifestyle choice is fear. In fact, the opposite of faith may be fear. Fear causes us to hunker down, stockpile, suspect everyone and extinguish love. Fear is more prevalent for those who think this is all there is and, therefore, I better get mine while I can.

There are legitimate threats to be aware of, but Christian faith proclaims: This is not all there is; true happiness comes from sharing even the little there is, and a better country awaits us down the road.

Theologian H.K. Oehmig writes, "If you are perennially worried about material security – keeping what you have or getting more of what you haven't got – there will be an erosion, slow or rapid, of your vitality as a disciple. What you do, and the way in which you do it for the self, will suffocate the breath of the Spirit."

Again and again, in gospel lesson after gospel lesson, Jesus beckons only the brave and truly courageous to dare to live by his teachings and emulate his fearless life.

Last week I got an email from a parishioner which began, "Did you know the legend of the Cherokee Indian Youths' rite of passage?" The boy is told that to become a man, he must stay out in woods alone.... His father takes him into the forest and blindfolds him. He is required to sit on a stump the whole night and not remove the blindfold until the rays of the morning sun shine through it.

He cannot cry out for help from anyone. Once he survives the night, he is a man. He cannot tell the other boys of this experience because each lad must come into manhood on his own. The boy is naturally terrified. He can hear all kinds of noises. Wild beasts must surely be all around him. Maybe even some humans might do him harm.

The wind blew the grass and earth, and shook his stump, but he sat stoically, never removing the blindfold. It would be the only way he could become a man!

Finally after a horrific night, the sun appeared, and he removed his blindfold.

It was then that he discovered his father sitting on a stump next to him. He had been at watch the entire night, protecting his son from harm.

We can be less fearful in the practice of our faith because, though not seen, God never lets us get out of sight.

Remember Jesus' words: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." And God is the Kingdom. Amen.