

Sermon for Proper 14C ~ August 8, 2010
Trinity Episcopal Church in Lawrence, Kansas
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Jesus, for the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, gave ultimate access to reality and access to God. That is the key thought of this letter, this book of the Bible. The writer is addressing a group of people who appear to be in need of exhortation lest they fall away from their faith. And, in the eleventh chapter we find this magnificent exhortation to have faith. What does it mean to have faith?

Before answering this question, I want to say that faith, as we are talking about it, is not a set of beliefs or doctrines. Faith in this context is the more basic, foundational sense, a quality or attitude, an instrument or an organ that gives us access to reality and to God. Without faith, in this sense, no set of beliefs or doctrines has real meaning. Bearing that in mind, what does it mean to have faith?

To have faith is to have a new way of looking at reality. Each of us is born with five senses, which enable us to apprehend reality as it appears on the surface. We see, hear, taste, touch, and smell the world in which we live. The organs that make this possible are a part of our natural equipment.

Faith is an organ that takes us beyond the five senses and enables us to perceive another, deeper level of reality. By means of faith, we are able to believe truths of God that are beyond our natural ability to understand. Thus, faith is itself a verification, the verification of the things we cannot see. So, we often speak of seeing with the eyes of faith.

Such faith, according to the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, enabled people like Abel and Enoch, Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Isaac to trust God's promises and to obey God. When faith dawns and begins to develop in a person's life, one is able to look at reality as it appears to the five senses and apprehend another dimension that gives things a meaning and purpose they did not have before. The earth becomes a shadow or a reflection of the reign of God that is coming. The community of faith foreshadows the cloud of witnesses. The Eucharist makes God's promise of the great banquet in the heavenly city something tangible and touchable. Human relationships become a place for love to be manifested and that love reflects God's love for all God has made. Even broken relationships, looked at with eyes of faith, present the possibility of reconciliation yet to be accomplished.

For the person of faith, all of life becomes charged with a reality and a promise that transcends the present moment and has about it an eternal quality. Faith gives us a new way of looking at things.

To have faith is to have a new source of energy. The key to understanding the power of faith lies in the wonder of the human psyche. Faith is itself the power given to those who have decided to believe and to trust. It is the power to *act*. Indecision keeps all that power locked up and causes depression, anxiety, and frustration. Confident decisions unlock enormous reservoirs of power and energy we will need to carry out those decisions. Thus, if we want to experience the energy of faith, we have to decide what we're going to *do* about the new understandings we have seen through the eyes of faith.

Finding creative solutions to complicated problems is the specialty of people of faith. Faith keeps us from giving in easily to problems and provides energy to struggle with them until they have been mastered and overcome.

Look around you. What you see here is a building erected 140 years ago to serve the needs of God's

people and this entire community. Twelve years before this edifice was built, this was a vacant tract of land. Charles and Samuel Reynolds and some early members of this parish had a vision and they made the crucial and costly decisions necessary to harness the energy of faith. It is inspiring and instructive to our generation to remember what their faith made possible. But it doesn't take eyes of faith to look at the past or to maintain the status quo. What about tomorrow? Can you look into the future with confidence and hope and see this house filled with all sorts, ages, and conditions of people? Can you and your new rector make the decisions and take the risks that are necessary to continue the building begun here long ago by your faithful forbearers? Can this generation's faith make God's church in this place stronger than ever?

You can and you will because you are people of faith. And the kind of faith you have is the sort that guided and empowered the patriarchs and prophets and our Lord and the early church to persevere and it will be the same for you. You have a vision and you will act on it, trusting in the promises of God. This faith is the fuel cell of the church! To have faith is to have a new source of energy.

To have faith is to have a new kind of security. Jesus said, "Have no fear, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom. Sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor. Provide for yourselves purses that don't wear out and save your riches in heaven, where they will never decrease, because no thief can get to them. For your heart will always be where your riches are."

What does he mean? He means that the Kingdom of Heaven, the Realm of God, is the most valuable thing in the universe and it is God's desire to give it to those who place their primary trust in him. Whatever we have here is but a shadow and dim reflection of the great treasury of that Kingdom. Like Abraham, who lived in a tent, with no permanent home, we look for that city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And yet, we cling for security to so many things.

Dr. Karen Woo and a team of colleagues have been involved in a medical mission, operating eye clinics in Afghanistan under the sponsorship of International Assistance Mission. They left the security of home and country to express God's love for the people of Afghanistan in this way. I am sad to say that on Friday, as Dr. Woo and nine of her colleagues were traveling from an eye clinic in Nuristan back to Kabul, the Taliban attacked their convoy, lined them up, robbed them, and shot them dead with AK-47 rifles. They knew the high degree of risk involved in doing missionary work in Afghanistan, but the call to serve Christ in this way was grounded in a faith that is greater than their fears. They are an inspiration to us and when we are asked to step out of our comfort zone for the Kingdom of God, remember that none of us is being asked to do anything so dangerous in Christ's name.

So, whether or not we actually sell all that we have and give the money to the poor, the role of faith is that it produces a sense of security apart from our attachments to the present material world and our possessions. And that makes us willing to let go at any moment in a great, obedient act of trust. When we trust God like that, God can do incredible things through us!

Finally, to have faith is to have new life. When Abraham answered the call of God to leave his safe, secure homeland and journey into a land he did not know, he began a new life. All who have such faith are the descendants of Abraham and have God's gift of new life.

This new life is characterized by joy! This is because faith keeps new life from becoming bogged down in the past, in hatred, in sorrow, in resentment, in things, and even in death. Why is that?

Martin Luther said, "Faith is a living trust of the heart." To live in faith is to live under the conviction that everything and everyone belongs to God. Faith, therefore, conditions the way we relate to our world and the people in it. And what is the opposite of trust? Fear. Faith is the agent that enables us to overcome fear. It relieves us of some anxiety that is produced by our idea that God won't come through. It frees us to accept our place in the divine plan for all things. We have a commission to live life to the fullest, equipped with this living trust of the heart. So, we have new life to live today and every day, until forever. When, with the yes of faith, we see and greet from afar the heavenly city where life never ends, we begin to experience a foretaste of that life here and now. That vision illuminates and transforms our present reality and we are alive unto God.

God's favor came to rest upon Abraham. God was pleased with Abraham not because of his genes, not because he followed all the rules, not because he belonged to the "right" church, but because he had faith. Abraham responded to God's call by going where God wanted him to go.

Having a steadfast faith does not mean to cling to a stake driven into the ground. It means clinging to a divine promise that moves us through time and history. We move in response to the summons of God and in so doing we move from one alien existence to another. As we move what was once invisible to us becomes visible, even as we move into another world that is new to us. Initially, we find ourselves returning to the land we left, but in the venture of faith, it lays less and less claim on us. So, what we finally discover is a sure vision of what we hope for and a firm conviction of what we cannot now see. Faith responds to promise!

And, so, with faith we are free to be *faithful*. Because we have access to and have actually tapped into the faith and faithfulness of God. Our faithfulness to God and to one another is a reflection of God's faith in us and faithfulness toward us.

The Rose

It's the heart that fears the breaking
that never learns the dance.

It's the dream afraid of waking
that never takes a chance.

It's the one who won't be taken
who cannot seem to give.

And the soul afraid of dying
who never learns to live.

When the night has been too long
when you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong

Just remember in the winter –
far beneath the winter snows
lies the seed that with the sun's love
in the spring becomes the rose.

To have faith is to have a new way of looking at reality, a new source of energy, a new security, and a new life. Reach out and experience the world and the persons around you with the five senses. Then, experience all of these things with the faith that comes from God so that you might see all of it as God does. It will transform you and free you to be and to become all you were made to be!