

Sunday, August 7, 2022
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 14 (Year C)
Genesis 15.1-6; Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16; Luke 12.32-40

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1165555947651655>

(Sermon begins at about 5:40)

“Active Faith”

What is faith? What does it mean to be a person of faith? What does it mean to live a life of faith? These are the fundamental questions we continually seek to answer every time we gather together as a worshiping community—what we sometimes refer to as a “community of faith.” And while we touch on these all-important questions every Sunday (or at least we try to), while we explore various aspects of the life of faith every Sunday (or at least we try to), it occurs to me that we don’t spend a lot of time talking about the broad, overarching questions I just posed. Perhaps because we take it for granted that we all know what we mean by “faith.” What we mean by “person of faith.” What we mean by “life of faith.”

Perhaps it is because we just assume that “faith” is the starting point. That “faith” is the foundation of what we do here. That “faith” is a part of who we are as Christians. That “faith” is part of what makes us and sustains us as Christians. Just like we don’t generally consciously think about the air we breathe. We just take it for granted that there is air for us to breathe. Unless something happens to reduce our ability to take in air—be it internal or external causes. Unless something happens that might taint the quality of the air we breathe. Similarly with our faith. We don’t generally consciously think much about our faith. We take it for granted that it is there, part of who we are. Unless something happens, internal or external, to cause us to question our faith. Unless something happens to taint or cause damage to our faith. Of course, faith is a little more complex than air. Certainly more subjective and changeable.

Given that we essentially take our faith for granted, sometimes it’s a good idea to step back to look at what faith means. I’m not talking about specific tenants of our faith. There are a few things that are sort of assumed about one’s faith in a Christian community: belief in God, belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Beyond that, there are all sorts of other tenants and doctrines that will vary person to person in terms of specific beliefs and their importance to the individual. Things that have distinguished schools of theological thought over the millennia, as well as the formation of the myriad of Christian denominations we see today. I’m talking about the fundamental characteristics of faith itself. Which happens to be the subject of all our Scripture readings today. Although only our second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews actually uses the term “faith.” Nonetheless, faith is certainly implied in the Old Testament and Gospel readings.

Our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews starts off providing a definition of faith. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” As is so often the case with Scripture, the devil is in the details. In this case, in the terms “assurance” and “conviction.” Now, in English these two words are essentially synonymous, depending on context. Both these

terms imply a belief in or a certainty about something. Which is appropriate when applied to faith. Faith being our personal beliefs which we hold onto as a means of providing some level of certainty in the changeable and sometimes chaotic world in which we live.

But that is not the case in the original Greek. The word we translate as “assurance” more accurately means “gives substance to.”¹ So, the concept that faith is the “assurance of things hoped for” would more accurately be rendered as faith is what “gives substance to things hoped for.” And the word we translate as “conviction” more accurately means “a proving of.”¹ So, the concept of faith being “the conviction of things not seen” would more accurately be rendered as faith is “the proving of things not seen.” Or better yet, “the proving of things that are not currently visible to us.” So combined together, the idea of faith, as defined by the author of Hebrews as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” has a far greater implication. That faith is what gives substance to and actually provides proof of that which we hope for. That it is faith that makes what we hope for a reality. This moves faith from being a passive set of propositions that we believe as individuals, as a community, and as a religion, to being something that is active. Faith is something that we actively engage in as individuals, as a community, and as a religion.

Let me repeat that, because I think this is the real crux of what the author of Hebrews, as well as the authors of our other readings for today, is really seeking to demonstrate when it comes to our thinking about, to our understanding of, what faith is. Faith is not something passive that we choose to believe. Faith is, rather, active, in that it is faith that makes what we hope for a reality. That we have our part to play in the fulfillment of that reality. In our Christian tradition, the most fundamental “hope” is our relationship with the Divine. A relationship that is characterized, even defined by, salvation, forgiveness of our sins, and the accompanying promise of a new and eternal life with God and with Christ. If the author of Hebrews is correct, our faith is a fundamental component in making that hope a reality. That it is not our beliefs about our relationship with the Divine that make it so, but our active participation in that relationship that makes it so. That we are in relationship with the Divine, not because we think or believe we are, but because of what we do to sustain our relationship with the Divine.

The Letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who faced persecution because of their faith and were tempted to abandon Christianity. The letter as a whole seeks to provide support and encouragement to those who were struggling with their life of faith, by looking at how Christ is the fulfillment, the ultimate meaning and goal, of the Old Testament. In the portion we heard today, the author seeks to help the original hearers—and us—to refocus and redefine what faith looks like. Again, moving from an understanding of faith as passive to an understanding of faith as being active. This is done by looking at examples of faithful obedience to God by Abraham and Sarah, the forerunners of the Jewish tradition, and, by extension, of our Christian tradition.

As the author of Hebrews notes, when God called Abraham and Sarah to follow him and to be his people, they did not just say, “Sure, great, we’re now God’s people.” They actually had to do something about it. They obeyed when God instructed them to leave their homeland and travel to a distant, foreign land. And how it was through their obedience, their willingness to do as God had asked them, that their descendants would be “as many as the stars of heaven and as

the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” This great nation descended from them becoming, through various other acts of obedience by Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants, the nation of Israel and the Jewish people, in turn leading to the formation of the Christian tradition. Faith in God and what God was doing was critical. But it was the actions of those who chose to follow God, who chose to use their faith to give substance to and actually provide proof of what they hoped for: a covenant relationship with God. That it was their faith—their acting out of faith—that made what they hoped for a reality. Or, as noted in our Old Testament reading from Genesis, telling of a critical moment in Abraham’s budding relationship with God, “and he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” That in acting out of faith, Abraham was living into righteousness, into right relationship with God. And embracing all that God had promised as fruits of that relationship. A statement that the Apostle Paul would later interpret to mean that it is faith that is the ultimate basis for salvation.²

Our reading from the Gospel according to Luke further illustrates this active nature of faith and places it in a solidly Christian context. What we heard today is part of a much longer discourse on vigilance in the life of faith. Vigilance itself implying a more active approach than a passive one. This larger section addresses vigilance in the face of persecution, vigilance with respect to wealth and possessions, and wrapping up with something that was of particular concern to the early Christians: vigilance with respect to Jesus’ Second Coming. Jesus conveys the importance of maintaining vigilance for the return of the Messiah through the parable of the watchful servants. In his set-up to this parable, Jesus states “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Indicating this has been God’s promise from the beginning in calling Abraham and Sarah into relationship.

If Abraham and Sarah are the beginning of this faith journey, today’s parable provides an image of the conclusion of our faith journey, at least the human portion of our faith journey. That being the eschaton, the end of the ages when Christ will come again. Jesus gives an indication of what that will be like using the image of servants waiting for their master to return. Of course, they do not know when that will be. Through the image of the servants, Jesus cautions that the prudent action while waiting for the master to return is to be vigilant, ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice. In this parable, Jesus emphasizes several points. The first is the certainty of his return. And while it is certain that he will return, another certainty is the uncertainty of its timing: “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” The uncertainty of the timing prompting, necessitating, vigilance.

Another point Jesus emphasizes is probably most applicable to the Church today. That even in the waiting, there are opportunities for faithful service. There is always work to be done, even while we wait. Again, not being passive about our faith, but being active. Seeking opportunities to share our faith, to share what we believe, in tangible ways. Seeking opportunities to make the Kingdom of God more of a reality here and now, even as we wait for its fulfillment in the return of our Lord.

As Jesus shows us in the parable, there is a relationship between present vigilance and future reward. That, just as with the master in the parable, when he returns in glory, we who have waited, who have continued to work for the coming of the Kingdom through our active faith, will be blessed and cared for as the master takes the role of a servant. An allusion to the

heavenly banquet to which we all are invited, where we all will be fed and nourished by our Lord. While we wait, we seek to be faithful, seek to live our faith, seek to do our part in ushering in the Kingdom by sharing a foretaste of that heavenly banquet with others. Opening the treasures of the Kingdom for ourselves and others.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2165.

² *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 59.