

Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio
Worship for 8 August 2010
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Lectionary Year C

Prepared by: Dr. K. Nicholas Yoda

New Testament Lectionary Reading: Hebrews 11:1-3

Sermon: Reasonable Faith

Opening Prayer: Triune God...take the voice of a mere man and the desire for cohesive thought...breathe on them by your Spirit so the voice that we hear is the very voice of God through the written Word of God and that in hearing we might understand and in understanding we might obey...Amen.

If you were to go to the newly rolled out website for the Presbyterian Church (USA)/www.pcusa.org, you would find the Biblical definition of faith staring at you through your computer screen. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." According to Princeton University, faith is: a strong belief in a supernatural power or powers that control human destiny. And though I agree that Princeton University is one of the finest educational institutions not only in this country but in the world for that matter, I feel that the writer (unknown) of the letter to the Hebrews has more than out done this University in its abilities to define this word. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the convictions of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

Now the liability with this verse, in my opinion, is that in today's culture, like so many popular Scripture references that end up on posters, greeting cards, and bumper stickers, the sound bite of Hebrews 11:1 has been taken from the Holy Writ for some sort of immediate benefit not taking into consideration what God, through the avenue of the inspired Word, might have actually intended. Many times, as I have seen it being presented, this verse (and many others for that matter) has been arrested from its Biblical context fueling a continued lack of proper understanding from the audience. (Examples that I have actually heard: Hebrews 11:1...You just need to have a little more faith in your heart! Faith is believing in something when common sense tells you not to! Hebrews 11:1...Faith? Are you serious? How about

this? Don't pray in my school and I won't think in your church.) To live in such realities is for the Christian faith to be no more than a harmless delusion or a logical absurdity. Brothers and sisters, when it comes to dealing with the Holy Scriptures, if pertinent points of translation, contextualization, and application are ignored, the end result will be asphyxiation for the assembled as a continued ignorance of understanding and employment is fostered. To approach the Word of God in such a fashion is not only detrimental, but even worse it is deadly to the spiritual life of the Christian church.

And to take this cultural practice of Biblical interpretation and application in light of this particular text to its logical end, I offer you two possibilities (logical extremes really) of how this might end up in the life of a person. The first possibility is that you will live your spiritual existence out from the posture that God engages only the heart and your faith is driven solely by emotion and experience. There is no engagement of thought, no questions to be wrestled with, and no development of the mind. It might just be summed up best by the 1970's hit lyrics sung by Morris Albert, "Feelings, nothing more than feelings."

I am reminded of a story I was told once of a lady well-known for her emotion driven faith. She would stand on her front porch and shout, "MY FAITH MAKES ME FEEL SO GOOD! PRAISE THE LORD!" Next door to her lived an atheist who would get so angry at her proclamations he would shout, "There ain't no Lord!!"

Hard times set in on this woman, and she prayed for GOD to send her some assistance. She stood on her porch and shouted, "MY FAITH MAKES ME FEEL SO GOOD! PRAISE THE LORD! GOD I ALSO NEED SOME FOOD!! LORD...I JUST HAVE THIS GOOD FEELING INSIDE THAT YOU ARE GOING TO SEND ME SOME GROCERIES!!" The next morning she went out on her porch and noted a large bag of groceries and shouted, "PRAISE THE LORD!"

The neighbor jumped from behind a bush and said, "Aha! I told you there was no Lord. I bought those groceries, God didn't!" The woman started jumping up and down and clapping her hands and said, "PRAISE THE LORD! MY FAITH MAKES ME FEEL SO GOOD! HE NOT ONLY SENT ME GROCERIES BUT HE MADE THE DEVIL PAY FOR THEM! PRAISE THE LORD!"

It was Mark Twain who once said, "Faith is believing something you know ain't true." And although it is a funny anecdote the question that is begged is, "What if the groceries had never come?". What if those hard times that befell the woman had been beyond the need for groceries such as divorce, terminal cancer, financial ruin, the loss of a child? Would her faith founded on the winds of feeling be able to sustain her? I doubt it.

I have recently started reading a book entitled *The Yellow House* by Martin Gayford that documents a nine week period in which the artist Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin spent living and painting together in Arles, France. Gayford describes the habits of Van Gogh's painting like this:

"Vincent was fired by excitement about the things and people he saw. He knew that some people thought that he painted too quickly, but he defended the habit. It was emotions that drove him, so that sometimes the strokes flowed as his words did when he was full of ideas. When this happened, one had to take advantage, because this mood would reverse. There would be hard days, empty of inspiration."

If our faith ebbs and flows under the wrong definition, interpretation, and application of our Lectionary text for today and is driven only by experience, emotion, and feelings, then I dare say that our spiritual health and habits will not be so different that the brush strokes of the great artist: flowing in good times and empty in the hard days.

Now, the second possibility that logically arises from living under the misguidance of today's text concerning faith is adopting a posture of existence that allows the mind to be so authoritative in life that such things as emotions and feelings become nothing more than chemical reactions of the body. It can even come to the point where a person becomes so literally lost in their thoughts that such things as God and faith and the reality of to soul cease to exist because they cannot be measured in some sort of empirical fashion (you cannot put faith in a test tube and weight God with a scale). Only that which is actually of a material substance...that which can actually be engaged by the senses exists and is real and can be thought about. In the words of the atheist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, "The universe we observe has no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares; DNA just is. And we dance to its music."

There is a story of an atheist philosopher who was walking along a steep cliff one day, when he accidentally got too close to the edge and fell. On the way down he grabbed a branch, which temporarily stopped his fall. He looked down and to his horror saw that the canyon fell straight down for more than a thousand feet.

He couldn't hang onto the branch forever, and there was no way for him to climb up the steep wall of the cliff so he began yelling for help, hoping that someone passing by would hear him and lower a rope or something.

“HELP! HELP! Is anyone up there? HELP!”

He yelled for a long time, but no one heard him. He was about to give up when he heard a voice. The conversation went something like this...

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes, yes! I can hear you. I'm down here!”

“I can see you. Are you all right?”

“Yes, but who are you, and where are you?”

“I am the Lord. I'm everywhere.”

“The Lord? You mean, GOD?”

“That's Me.”

“God, please help me! I promise if, you'll get me down from here, I'll do anything! I will have faith! I will believe!”

“Easy on the promises. Let's get you off from there; then we can talk. Now, here's what I want you to do. Listen carefully.”

“I'll do anything, Lord. Just tell me what to do.”

“Okay. Let go of the branch.”

“What?”

“I said, let go of the branch. Just trust Me. Let go.”

There was a long silence and finally the atheist philosopher yelled, “HELP! HELP! IS ANYONE ELSE UP THERE?”

Again, it is a funny anecdote. The sad reality though is that this is very real. The atheist journalist Christopher Hitchens (author of: *How God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*) once stated, “Faith is the surrender of the mind; it's the surrender of reason, it's the surrender of the only thing that makes us different from other mammals. It's our need to believe, and to surrender our skepticism and our reason, our yearning to discard that and put all our trust or faith in someone or something, that is the

sinister thing to me. Of all the supposed virtues, faith must be the most overrated.” The sad reality that has emerged in the life of Mr. Hitchens is that he now has to live into the reality of his own worldview. Anderson Cooper recently did an interview with Christopher Hitchens, recently diagnosed with esophageal cancer, asking him if his current condition has altered his well known opinions on faith, religion, and prayer. Hitchens replied, “Many people upon receiving a cancer diagnosis would turn to God and ask ‘Why me?’. I ask, ‘Why not me?’”.

“Why not me?” Though it is the logical outworking of the worldview that Christopher Hitchens holds, I have never heard a more depressing reaction to such a troubling reality. And what all of this means is that when our thinking ebbs and flows under the wrong definition, interpretation, and application of our Lectionary text for today and trumps the reality that God has placed eternity in our hearts (in the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes) where a natural craving for the Divine is intrinsic, the only place to go in life is to the reality that the American writer and poet Arthur Guiterman described in this way: “First dentistry was painless; then bicycles were chainless and carriages were horseless and many laws, enforceless. Next, cookery was fireless, telegraphy was wireless, cigars were nicotineless, and coffee, caffeineless. Soon oranges were seedless, the putting green was weedless, the college boy hatless, the proper diet, fatless. Now motor roads are dustless, the latest steel is rustless, our tennis courts are sodless, our new religions, godless.” Brothers and sisters, hold on to the word of Augustine: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee, O Lord.”

With all this being said to frame where we are to go next, let me take us all the way back to the very beginning and start with the Biblical definition of faith. Hebrews 11:1 states, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In a time where the audience of this letter (in the midst of persecution and the trials of life) needed to be summoned to hold on to faith to the true rest found in Christ and to encourage others in the church to preserve, the writer uses imagery and metaphor, allusion to the Old Testament, comparison and analogy, contrast, and long, flowing sentences that build to a climax in order to not only approach the audience through their experience of faith but also to remind them that their faith is grounded in the most truthful and superior historical revelation and reality of Jesus

the Christ. There is the need to combat the melancholy and to encourage the Christian community who were having trouble holding onto hope when Christ did not return immediately following His resurrection.

The door that the writer invites the community to walk through is the door of faith (“pistis” in the Greek) and the hinges of that door of faith are assurance (“hypostasis”) and conviction (“elenchos”). What is often missed is the linguistic fact that the writer of this passage, in carefully being led by God (all Scripture is God-breathed according to the Apostle Paul), chose two Greek words that merge the realities and the entities of the mind and the heart into a marriage necessary for faith to be an active agent in the life of a follower of Christ. I have heard it said many a time that the longest journey one must take is the eighteen inches from the head to the heart. In direct opposition to such thinking, the writer of this letter to the Hebrews (in the midst of a culture that did not divorce the head from the heart to begin with like we do in modern Western culture) was only interested in the journey of faith that every believer in Jesus Christ must make engaging the head and the heart in a perfectly synchronized tandem.

To return briefly to the hinge words of faith that the writer uses (assurance and conviction), it needs to be pointed out that the Greek word for assurance (hypostasis) is a word that has much to do with our subjective belief (the movements of the heart). As faith is first and foremost a gift of the Holy Spirit (But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you./John 14:26), the experience of the Holy Spirit is veridical and unmistakable. For the believer, such a person does not need supplementary arguments or outside evidence in order to know and know with confidence that they have in fact been gifted with faith in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. This assurance dwells in the soil of the heart and grows the beautiful blooming flowers of hope.

The Greek word for conviction (“elenchos”) implies an objective side of faith. “It is the proof that is beyond a reasonable doubt that there is something worth believing in.” (David E. Gray) It is the reality that a faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. It allows us to explain the facts that come through our experience. It is what allows me the ability to get inside a 60,000 pound metal machine and shoot into the

atmosphere at a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet. When that voice comes over the intercom and announces, “This is your Captain speaking...now sit back and enjoy to flight.”, I relax at the knowledge that I have done this before, that this plane has been properly designed and tested under the rigors of the FAA, that these pilots have gone through the proper training and accreditation that allows them the privilege and responsibility of get us safely to our destination, and that I do not have to fly this plane from my seat of 23B. The conviction lies in the external and tested evidence that allows us to trust even in the things that we cannot see.

This is faith that hinges on assurance and conviction, heart and head, subjective and objective. And all of this culminates and indicates that for us, as followers of Jesus the Christ, our faith is not “a vague hope grounded in imaginary, wishful thinking. Instead, faith is a settled confidence that something in the future – something that is not yet seen but has been promised by God – will actually come to pass because God will bring it about. Thus Biblical faith is not blind trust in the face of contrary evidence, not an unknowable ‘leap in the dark’; rather Biblical faith is a confident trust in the eternal God who has revealed Himself in His Word and in the person of Jesus Christ, whose promises have proven from generation to generation, and never leave nor forsake His own. Such faith in the unseen realities of God is emphasized throughout and has provided confidence and assurance to all who receive Christ as their Lord and Savior.” (Notes from the ESV Study Bible)

In the name of the Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

