

Life's Best: Faith

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The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
The Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 24, 2012

Job 38:1-11; Hebrews 11:1-16; Mark 4:35-41

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” --
Hebrews 11:1

Today is the fourth and final sermon in a series on life's best practices. Three weeks ago, I urged you to take up the practice of living abundantly by accepting Jesus's offer of abundant life. Two weeks ago, I held up living connectedly, and last week I said that living with a spiritual, psychological, and emotional center is crucial to living life at its best.

Today I want to conclude this list of best practices for living on an entirely predictable note with the word “faith.” Of course, sooner or later, you'd expect a preacher to talk about faith, because faith is what preachers talk about. I wouldn't have a job if you didn't have faith, and the reason I know you have faith is because you showed up here this morning.

Your Christian faith, in all its variety and uncertainty, is what brought you to church this morning and it is what brings you to church Sunday after Sunday. It is faith that brings people to church, and always has, because so much of what the Christian church stands for and lives for you don't see. The realities of the Christian faith and the Christian church are more invisible than visible, and that's one of the tricky parts of being a Christian.

We in the Christian church are like those vast icebergs – apparently, now in danger because of climate change – whose visible portion is only a small part of their reality. The Christian church lives with that same visible-invisible reality. People come to church Sunday after Sunday in the faith that what they're doing matters, even if they can't see the results right away or ever. We are not a results-driven institution; we are a faith-driven institution. We depend less on our track record and more on the track that is set before us. We live, not for the past, but for the future, because it is toward the future that the voice of God calls us.

Think about what we pray for when we say our prayers. We pray for peace in the world, and the fighting continues. We pray for justice in our economic arrangements, and people still starve while others are smothered with stuff and too much food. We pray for honesty and fairness in our political dealings with one another, and corruption and underhandedness appear daily in the headlines.

So much of what the church lives for and stands for has yet to be realized, and that's perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the church. We live because of what happened, but we live for what has not yet happened. The Spirit of God that descended on a group of Jesus's followers on Pentecost brought the church into being, but our reason for being is not back there, it's out there, ahead of us. Our past is important, to be sure – which is why a bunch of us is headed to New England in a few days – but our

future is what beckons. What was and what is have their important place in life, but what can and someday will be – that’s the call of God in our lives, and there is no better practice for living than to live every day believing, as Robert Burns so famously put it, that “the best is yet to be.”

During the Second World War, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a series of sermons in the Riverside Church in New York City, one of which was entitled “A Great Time to Be Alive.” It was during the most perilous years of the war, when Christians around the world were slaughtering one another on an unprecedented scale, and Fosdick admitted that for any sensitive Christian, who read the words of Jesus and took his teachings and lifestyle seriously, it was a ghastly time to be alive. “This is an especially hideous generation for Christians,” Fosdick said, acknowledging the depravity into which millions upon millions of followers of the Prince of Peace had been dragged and dragged others. But then, Fosdick said, it was also a great time to be alive, because it is during the times of greatest adversity and the times of dimmest prospects that the power of those invisible realities that make up faith become most manifest.

The reality can be and often is hideous, but faith, as Fosdick said in another sermon, is the power to see it through to what we believe and know will be better. As a friend of mine once told me when I was going through a particularly unattractive period of self-pity, “You can have this, or you can have something better. The choice is yours.”

Our Calvinist ancestors believed that faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and I share that belief. I don’t believe that faith can be drummed up in or drummed into a person. It is a gift from God. Everything I’ve seen in my experience attests to that reality.

But I also believe, firmly, that those of us who claim to have faith can influence the lives of others in such a way that the possibility for the Holy Spirit to work in them is increased dramatically. How people of faith live matters, not only for what we accomplish in feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, but also for what we inspire in others through our witness to the power of God.

I believe that this is what Jesus meant when he called us light and leaven and salt. I believe people who live faithful lives, not just on Sunday, and not just in the little stuff, but day in and day out, in the big stuff and the stuff that requires sacrifice – those people, I believe, have tremendous power. They can and have and do literally change the world.

Let me give you an example. You and I take hospitals for granted, but once upon a time, there was no such thing, and sick people, instead of being taken in and cared for by strangers, were driven out for fear of their sickness harming others. If you became ill, it was up to your relatives, if you had any, to take care of you as best they could, and if you didn’t have any relatives, you were left to fend for yourself. It was Christians, first taking care of each other, and then taking care of strangers, to the surprise and shock and sometimes horror of ordinary respectable people, who gave birth to the institutions that evolved into hospitals. The power of compassion, realized in simple acts repeated again and again, literally changed the world.

Faith is not about having all the answers. Faith is about moving forward, toward that city, as our reading from Hebrews says, whose builder and maker is God. That’s what that list of our spiritual ancestors tells us. Those were the folks, among all the millions of their contemporaries, who chose to move forward toward the unseen voice of God, and let that, rather than the seen, determine their actions and shape their lives. They didn’t know the outcome of their actions, but they trusted that the God who called them called them to the good. That’s what our still-speaking God says to us and to everyone, today and every day: You can have this, or you can have something better.

Let me close by lifting up an image I’ve found helpful as I think about what it means to live life’s best practice of faith.

The headlights on our cars typically show us about 500 feet in front of our vehicle, but with that 500 feet of illuminated space, we are able to drive all the way across the country, at night, if we have to. All we have to do is turn our headlights on.

Faith in God, as shown to us in the one who called himself the light of the world, is nothing more than turning on our spiritual headlights. Jesus showed us what it looks like to live with your spiritual headlights on. It is living compassionately with others, no exceptions. It is living peacefully with others, no exceptions. It is living justly with others, no exceptions. It is living righteously with others, no exceptions. In short, it is to live loving God above all else and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. That's living with our headlights on.

Dear friends, my prayer for you is that you will turn your headlights on and start your engines.