

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, August 18, 2019

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“EXPLORING THE GIFT OF FAITH”

Hebrews 11:1

There is nothing more basic to the Christian life than faith. We Christians call ourselves people of faith. We refer to congregations as “communities of faith.” In 1st Corinthians 13 Paul lists the three spiritual gifts God has given us for Christian living – faith, hope and love. Paul refers to love as the greatest gift, but names faith first, because it is the basic gift, the good soil in which the other gifts take root and grow. I want us to explore this gift of faith today, based the classic definition in Hebrews 11:1. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Today we will explore the nature of faith, the content of our faith, the source of our faith, and the results of our faith.

First, the nature of faith. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Focus on the second part of that statement- “the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is believing in things you can’t see, being convinced of them.

I read about the African animal called the impala. They can jump ten feet high. By one single leap they can move 30 feet ahead. Yet these magnificent animals can be held in a zoo behind a three-foot-high wall. Impalas will not jump if they can’t see where their feet will land.

But faith is not like that. Faith is having the conviction of things not seen. It means knowing there is solid ground to land on even when you can’t see it with your eyes.

Some people say, “I only believe in what I see.” But even our eyes can sometimes fool us. With Photoshop and all the ways images can be manipulated, you can never be quite sure of what you see. In many ways your eyes can mislead you. My eyes sometimes tell me that an object is further away or closer than it actually is.

To say, “I only believe in what I see,” sounds thoughtful and sophisticated. But we all believe in things we don’t see. We all act on the conviction of things not seen. When you go into a restaurant, you eat your meal without going to the kitchen to make sure that the chef is following the proper standards of cleanliness and food preparation. In any case, they tell you that going into the kitchen can spoil the meal. When you fly you trust that the plane has been serviced and that the pilot will get you to your destination safely. We feel love and know that it exists and act on it though we don’t actually see the thing called love. What we see are the results and the fruits of love. Each of us is a result of God’s love and human love. Trust is something else we don’t see. We trust people to do what is right and good without seeing every move they make. If I mail a

letter I trust that it will arrive at its destination. I don't see the process that it goes through to get there. Sometimes we have to verify, yes, but it is impossible to live without trusting others. Marriage would be impossible without trust and mercy and kindness.

Often we think "seeing is believing" lies in the realm of science, but even scientists believe in things they don't directly see. Scientists don't see the protons and neutrons and electrons which are the building blocks of matter. But scientists are convinced these unseen things exist because they explain the things we do see. Astronomers believe in heavenly objects like far away planets and stars and black holes without seeing them directly. The movement of other objects which they do see leads them to believe in the existence of these unseen objects. They are convinced of things they don't see. The writer to the Hebrews was not a scientific man, but he made a scientific statement in verse 3, "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."

We all have the conviction of things not seen. This kind of believing is not just restricted to believing in God. Yes, some people say, "I only believe in what I see." But if they really lived that way, they would be as restricted as the impala in the pen. The truth is that believing in things you don't see not only makes life fuller and richer; it makes living possible. The risen Lord Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." The very nature of faith is believing in what you don't see and being convinced of things not seen. We believe in the existence of the God whom we cannot and do not see. And that's not irrational. There are very good reasons for such faith. We have the witness of God's word and the witness of the creation itself. In fact, the evidence for the Creator is baked right into the whole universe, if we are willing to accept it.

Let's look next at the content of our faith.

Some people say, "I'm a person of faith." That's great, but even an atheist lives by faith - the faith that God doesn't exist. But Christian faith has a particular content. Notice that the Apostles Creed focuses on Jesus. "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to hell. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead." Paul writes 1 Corinthians, "I passed on to you as of first importance what I had received; that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared..." Of first importance in the Christian faith - Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended and coming again.

Jesus said in John's Gospel, "Believe in God, believe also in me..." That word "also" is vitally important. Many people believe in God; we certainly do, but we believe also in Jesus. We believe in God through Jesus Christ. We believe in God as Jesus revealed God to us. It is because of Jesus that we say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth." It is because of Jesus that we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," for he sent another to be with us forever, the Paraclete, the Comforter, the Helper. It is because of Jesus that we say "I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body

and the life everlasting.” Jesus Christ is the essential content of Christian faith. To him our faith is directed. To him our trust is given. We believe in his teachings and his saving work and his eternal promises. Belief in Jesus as Lord and God distinguishes Christian faith from all other faiths.

Now let's think about the source of our faith.

Where does this faith in Jesus, the Christian faith come from? Well, it comes to us from God through his word. Faith in the living God, and trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour comes from hearing the word of God, specifically the story of what God has done for us in his Son. Paul tells us, “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”

The story of Jesus can be told by someone preaching in church or on TV or in a large stadium, or by a Sunday School teacher, or through a movie, or by a person sharing their personal story of how Jesus changed their life. But here's what happens when we hear the story. God's Spirit works in conjunction with God's word to convict you of your need for a Saviour, and moves you to put your trust in Christ as that Saviour.

Now it is not automatic. Often people must hear the story of Jesus many times before they are ready to make a decision of faith. But because God's Spirit works together with the word of God, you can be sure of this. When you finally make the leap of faith and put your trust in Christ, you are landing on solid ground. Though you don't see him in the flesh, you are landing on the rock of our salvation. You are putting yourself into strong loving arms that will never let you go in life, in death, or in life beyond death. What is the source of our Christian faith? It comes from God through the word of the Gospel imparted to our hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit. God himself gives us faith as the essential spiritual gift.

Thank God, most of us here have received God's precious gift of faith. It is a reality in our lives. And if you haven't yet received that gift, you can be sure that God is opening your heart to do so.

Finally, let's consider the results of our faith.

There are two results. First, salvation. Hebrews tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. But by faith we are accepted and declared righteous by God. “By faith Abel received approval as righteous...by faith Enoch pleased God...by faith Noah became an heir to righteousness...” Genesis 15 tells us that “Abraham believed the LORD and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Paul writes, “I have a righteousness, not that comes from obeying the law, but that comes through faith in Christ.” We must be righteous before God if we are going to avoid hell and enter heaven. And we can't make ourselves righteous by good works and good living. Our own goodness is good, but it's not enough before the holiness of God. But when you put your trust in Christ the Saviour, God forgives your sin and gives you the righteous standing you need. God makes you acceptable to him now and forever. By God's grace in Jesus Christ we are saved through faith.

The other result of faith is that we live with hope. By faith we look to the future with confidence, knowing that in everything God is at work for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. We know that God will accomplish his purposes for us and for the world,

that God will do what he has promised. The God who raised his Son from the dead is unstoppable. And in hope we look beyond this world to the heavenly city, where Jesus has prepared a place for his people. The result of faith in God and in his Son Jesus Christ is that we live with hope, eternal hope.

I end with a story sent to me by a Christian man who attended this church for a while. He now worships at another church, though he enjoyed his time here and thanked us for the services and the hospitality. He wrote:

“I had an incredible experience during Easter. I have artificial limbs on both legs below my knees. I took communion on Good Friday and started to feel different, like the Holy Spirit was doing something. I normally walk 2 kilometres a day with the artificial limbs, but suddenly started walking further and further. During that week, I walked 15 kilometres per day on average. On Easter Sunday I walked 29 kilometres. I thought that no one might believe me, but the app on my phone tracked all my steps! So I’ve joined the “Walk So Kids Can Talk” marathon on the weekend, and my whole team at work joined as well. We’ve raised a lot so far, and I’m thrilled, as kids are so precious. So it was quite the Passion Week, and amazing things happened, all because of Jesus.”

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And sometimes by his grace, God allows us to see!