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THE FAITH OF SAINTS AND SINNERS

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Hebrews 11.1-3, 13-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 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 seen.

Many have died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desired a better country, that is, a spiritual one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them.

“Leo Bebb was not an Eagle Scout. He ran a religious diploma mill and ordained people through the mail for a fee. He did five years in the pen on a charge of indecent exposure involving children. He had a child by the wife of his twin brother. But he was a risk-taker. He was as round and fat and as full of bounce as a rubber ball. [He was a saint]. He was without pretense. He was good company. Above all else, he was extraordinarily alive—so much so for me anyway that when I was writing about him I could hardly wait to get back to my study every morning to write. That’s when I began not only to see that he was a saint, but to see also what a saint is.”

So writes novelist Frederick Buechner about one of the characters in one of his novels. Buechner goes on to say in his book *Secrets in the Dark* that it is often fictitious characters like Leo Bebb who taught him about faith. Faith and fiction, he says, are the journeys through time, the journeys of our lives that are able to move through the ups and downs of life with some sense that events are somehow or other leading somewhere. Whatever our faith may be, it is inseparable from the story of what has happened to us, and what is happening now, just like fiction. In fiction as in faith there is a belief that life is not just a series of events causing other events to happen but that life has a plot like a novel has a plot even though we can’t always see it when we’re on a particular page or in a particular day.

Buechner tells about how Leo Bebb just came alive for him, a character he had supposedly created but which ended up having a life of his own. Bebb was so alive, Buechner says, that each was an adventure just to see what Bebb would do, what encounters he would have and how he would respond to them.

Does that seem strange for an author to not know what his characters are doing each day; to not control what is happening to them in order to hasten the plot that they are part of in the story? But truth be told, this is the best kind of author: one who lets the characters she has created take on a life of their own. And isn't this a way to think about our lives in relationship to God that rings true to our experience? There are some who believe that what God created, God controls; that God created in order to control; that God is in charge of everything and makes everything happen in a preordained way, knowing exactly how it will turn out and how each character turns out. But I don't think that's what it's really like. I rather like to look at God like an author who has created a world that has a life of its own, a life that is full of surprises, a life that has enough gusto to make it interesting and engaging, a life that can see in a person like Leo Bebb a saint. The good news is that we're not expected to get it right all the time; that God doesn't control us or mete out punishment for not doing what we're supposed to do. God is the author who likes his characters on this earth to live with verve, to be extraordinarily alive, to take risks, to be fully alive and fully human with all the quirks and turns that may involve.

Fiction isn't history; it is story. Faith isn't certainty; it is believing, trusting. Life is about living out the story by faith. The author of Hebrews reminds us that we live by faith, by our hunches that there's a purpose to all of this living. Abraham and Isaac and David and all the saints of the church were risk-takers who didn't know if what they were doing would turn out, but they forged ahead. Was not Jesus the ultimate risk-taker who lived and died for what he believed to be truth? Here is the main character in God's drama for us Christians and his life didn't turn out quite as he had planned. And yet his life is the central part of the story by which we fashion our lives. Jesus bet his life on the truth of justice. Jesus lost his life betting on the truth of justice. But God, the author of it all, ultimately transformed that death into something powerfully new and alive.

What are you betting your life on? Are you betting on the hope that everything will turn out the way you want it to turn out? Or are you betting on the hope that everything will turn out as God wants it to turn out? Do you bet your life on the belief that whatever happens will somehow have purpose and meaning for you? Or are you betting on the hope that whatever happens will somehow have purpose and meaning in God's larger story? When we bet on the former, we live by angst and fear. When we bet on the latter, we live by faith because we believe that each day, each event, somehow, some way fits into the larger story that God is writing, even if, as Hebrews says, we don't get to see it happen.

God writes that story with a lot of crooked lines, with a lot of crooked lives, with a lot of crooked plots. That's why for Buechner Leo Bebb was a saint in spite of the dark side of his life, having affairs and taking advantage of people. A saint, Buechner says, is not someone who is perfect. A saint is a life-giver. A saint is not someone who gets it right all the time, or maybe even most of the time. A saint is a human being with the same sorts of hang-ups and abysses as the rest of us, but is someone who, if they touch your life, you become alive in a new way. That's why the author of the Hebrews says King David was a man of faith even though he had a man killed so he could take his wife. And why Rahab was listed as a woman who lived by faith even though she was a prostitute and helped spies bring down her city. These characters through whom God writes the story of life are risk-takers and faith-livers and the ones after whom we model our own journey.

What are you betting your life on? A God who can be defined and whose ways are always known and whose will is always clear? Or a God who appears elusive and ambiguous, a God whose ways are not our ways, a God who raises more questions than he answers, a God who causes more doubt than certainty? If the former, then we create a God in OUR image, a God who meets OUR expectations and that is a god who is an idol. But if the latter, then we are living by faith, for there is so much in life that hides God and denies the very possibility of God that there are times when it is hard not to deny God altogether. There is always the need for doubt when living by faith because that's the only way we can breathe sometimes, for a God who always acts the way we expect is a God of our own making who eventually smothers us to death with our own self-righteousness.

Faith helps us whistle in the dark. To whistle in the dark is more than just an attempt to **convince** ourselves that dark is not all there is. It is also to **remind** ourselves that dark is not all there is because even in the dark there is hope. Even in the dark we have the power to whistle and it is powerful enough to hold the dark at bay. The tunes we whistle in the dark are the images we make of that hope. They are the books we write with our lives as characters in the story that God is creating.

In the same way, faith is the way we participate in the story, the plot of which we only have a hint of and the end of which we know nothing about. In this fiction we call life, faith is the way we shape and fashion a story out of the events of every day whether we label those events bad or good. As characters in God's story, we are part of making the story happen, coming alive for the Divine Author who doesn't control what we do and say to make the story come out right but who allows us room to move as we wish so that the story is fresh and new each day. And it is by faith that we believe that God the Author will weave out of the details of our lives a theme that will be part of the plot that will move the story to its intended purpose.

Day by day, page by page, chapter by chapter, year by year our own story unfolds. Things happen. People come and go. The scene shifts. Time runs by. Time runs out. Maybe it is all utterly meaningless. Maybe it is all unutterably meaningful. If you want to know which it is, pay attention: Be still and know that I am God says the Divine Author. And as we come to this communion table we come to do just that. This bread and this wine are not answers to our deepest questions but nourishment for the quest in the holy fiction of life that we can live out only by faith. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

(This sermon is based heavily on, and quotes significantly from, Frederick Buechner's book *Secrets in the Dark*, pages 169-183. I am indebted to this book for its insights and thoughts for my own faith journey.)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal Spirit, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, much less these temples of stone and wood which our hands build, but whose holy spirit dwells within our human spirit, we come to focus our thoughts on your eternal values. From the violence and turmoil of our world, from the confusion of our too-busy lives, and from the anxiety of coping with matters beyond our control, we come for an hour of tranquility, of prayer, of singing and praying. Meet us in this room that we may encounter your peace in a way that will transform us, even if only in part and for a brief time.

Today we pray you to lift us above the immediate and set us in the wider horizons of the eternal. It is easy to grow accustomed to the ugliness of life; it is easy to become complacent to the tragedies of each day; it is sometimes our best coping mechanism to just shut down due to the overload of bad news on the television and world-wide atrocities in the newspapers. As people of faith we want to be part of the healing, and we pray you to empower us to overcome complacent minds and apathetic hearts so we may serve.

Center our lives on faith instead of fear. While fear is often justified and the natural reaction of the human spirit to the unknown, faith is the only conqueror of the fear that so easily numbs our souls. May those of us who have come here with dark foreboding go out with faith renewed and spirits empowered to overcome.

We lay before you with solemn prayer the sorry estate of our world today, its violence and uproar, its trust in force, its menace of war. While we may never see peace in our lifetime, we fervently pray for its advent. It is by faith that we offer up ourselves and our resources for that which may never be achieved in our lifetime, believing that in some lifetime peace will be the order of the day.

To that end we vow to be peacemakers and healers whenever the situation demands. May we reach out to those who are ill, to those who are grieving, to those who are homebound, to those dealing with mental illness, to those dealing with physical challenges, to those with special needs, to those whose lives are made difficult by prejudice, and to those for whom liberty and justice has not been an option. Wing your way to them through us.

Lead us today in your love. In the name of the Christ, Amen.

(Based on a prayer by Harry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church, New York City)