



The New England Church Pulpit

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Faithful Uncertainty

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Hebrews 11

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 visible.

By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, setting out though not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as a foreigner, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him of the same promise. By faith he and his wife Sarah received the power of parenthood, even in their old age. And their descendants were as many as the stars of heaven and as innumerable as the grains of sand by the seashore. All of these 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.

By faith, Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith the people of Israel passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled by Joshua and the people for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had received the spies in peace.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

This chapter in Hebrews gives a thumbnail sketch of the lives of the biblical greats who, in the face of difficulty or danger or temptation to give up, trod forward by faith. By faith Abraham; by faith Moses; by faith Joshua and Rahab. Here is a great cloud of witnesses upon which the Jewish community has persevered for generations and upon which the Christian community finds its foundation in faith when the world taunts its trust in certainties.

We are people of faith, which, by definition, means that we are not people of certainty. That may seem incongruous for people who believe, but what we believe is not based on proof or certainty, but on faith. We are people of faith. And as such, we live counter culturally, for society, especially in today's world, not only clamors for certainty but will have little to do with that which isn't certain. By faith Abraham Lincoln; by faith Martin Luther King, Jr.; by faith Nelson Mandela lived against their culture by faith.

M. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, calls the world's allurements of certainty "the temptation to be less than human." In a lecture on that subject, he states that Jesus identifies with our humanity in his baptism, and we, in our baptism, are identified by God as beloved as well. We each have within us both human and divine, having, as we are told in that story of creation, the breath of God. In the temptations which followed Jesus's baptism he identifies with our own temptations to doubt our identity as the beloved and thus become less than human.

The temptations of Jesus were temptations toward certainty, to know in concrete fact that God would turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger and if he threw himself from the pinnacle of the temple, God would send the angels to catch him. Yielding to the temptations for tangible evidence of the certainty of God's love would negate the very heart of Jesus's life and invitation to live in the world as God would have it, for it is by FAITH that we live, not by certainty. "Nothing is more dangerous to our souls," Barnes says "than trying to be certain we're loved by God."

When Barnes made this statement in a lecture, the line at the microphone during the Q&A session following was long and his audience intense in their defense of certainty. And when he posited that we live by faith and not by certainty to a group of clergy, one clergyman was so incensed at the implication of this statement, he pounded his fist on the table as he asserted "I am absolutely certain of our faith." Barnes replied that having faith in God is far better than being certain about God, for faith can take us to holy realms certainty can never reach.

(M. Craig Barnes, Christian Century, July 13, 2018)

Think about that: faith can take us to holy realms certainty can never reach. It's like the picture that paints a thousand words, or that piece of music that expresses the inexpressible, both picture and music taking us to places words can never reach. Faith is a realm unto itself, a realm of hope and joy that can sustain us even amid the most difficult of hardships. It was faith, not certainty, that sustained the Holocaust survivors; it was faith that sustained those youth trapped in the cave in Thailand, for in such situations, the facts go for nothing when it comes to hope.

Our history of certainty goes all the way back to the days of Israel when the people wanted to know that God was leading them; they wanted tangible proof of God's presence. They demanded of Abraham and Moses and Joshua concrete confirmation that what they were being asked to do would get them where they wanted to go and be what they wanted to be. But as we read in Hebrews, it was faith that sustained these patriarchs and matriarchs, making of them the foundation of our own faith journey.

And in our New Testament, it was Thomas who speaks for most of us when he said he wouldn't believe it was Jesus until he could put his hand in the nail prints of the crucified hands, thus demanding that belief be based on tangible fact. But that's not how it works, Jesus said. And I think about the hilarious, though poignant words of Herod in the musical "Jesus Christ, Superstar," when he told Jesus that if he walked across his swimming pool he'd let him go free. But proof is not the underpinnings of the kingdom of God. Faith is about believing not seeing.

One of the ironies of church history, Barnes notes, is that those most threatened by the Enlightenment's caution about the limits of rationality for finding God began to adopt the Enlightenment's rationale in a quest for theological certainty. Attempting to preserve the old faith, they developed new theologies of infallibility and inerrancy the church had never heard of before.

But most of the 18th-century philosophers weren't interested in getting rid of religion; they just wanted us to call it faith. Faith: the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen. Faithfully uncertain is our quest. By faith, when waiting for test results; by faith, when going against the flow of the culture; by faith, when a loved one dies; by faith, when we are caught between a rock and a hard place...we go forward, believing not in certainties or fact but in the love of God to sustain us and to give us courage to put one foot in front of the other.

Healthy relationships are held together with faith, whether a relationship with God, a marriage, a parent and child, or a friendship; they are all bound together by faith. Love renews our humanity precisely because it comes as a grace. And the best way to destroy love is to demand its certainty, to make someone provide it or make it certain or necessary. There are no guarantees in relationships so to demand certainty is to negate the relationship, for the enigmatic but necessary quality that sustains relationships of any kind is only known by faith. Faith is a way of saying, "I love you." And thankfully, for reasons certainty and rationality can't explain, God, and spouses, and family, and friends keep choosing to have faith in our faith.

As a caring church for thinking people we value the art of an intellectual approach to our faith journey but we must keep the categories of intellectual certainty and faith distinct. When we drive over a bridge we want to be certain the engineers who built it weren't thinking about faith, but about mathematics and good structural engineering design. And when we come to church for worship, we really don't want an engineer in the pulpit, Barnes says. Thinking about the biblical texts and our faith journey is important so we don't fall into the trap of easy answers, cheap grace, or trying to prove the existence of God. But a faith that demands certainty is no faith. And walking that thin line is like driving at night on a dark country road. We are grateful for the certainty of headlights that illumine the road only a few hundred feet in front of us, and though we cannot see the road beyond that point, we can drive all the way through the night like that.

Faith: the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of morning, noon, and nighttime; Force that decrees summer, spring, autumn, and winter; Ground of Being yesterday, today, and forever, we give thanks for the threshold of this new day. Once more the mountains and the hills break forth into singing and the trees of the field clap their hands, as the prophet Isaiah so poetically reminds us. Let nature speak to us not of herself only but of the eternal artist on whose palette all her colors have been mixed and doled out in such magnificent abundance.

Deepen our faith this day, God of hope. Give us new insights into things of eternal value, things unseen and indescribable but joyful and life-giving. Save us from being slaves of our eyes and believing only what they see. Rescue us from the idolatry of trusting only facts and data and explainable phenomena. Help us understand that through the veil of the visible the meaning of life must come...invisible, eternal, and spiritual.

Enliven our hope this day, God of peace. Save us from the current cynicism of our world, from its skepticism and its disbelief in the possibilities of human life. Lift us above the derogatory and condemning attitude that would kill all things that are right and make impossible anything that is lovely. Redeem us from racism and homophobia, from misogyny and hatred, from inflation of pride and exaggerated hubris that is so prevalent in our society. Heighten our hopes and send us out believing once more than in the heart of humankind are possibilities which you can empower into reality.

Expand our love this day, God of life, that we may transcend our selfishness and rise above our hatefulness. Cleanse us from our vindictive tendencies and give us grace to soar higher than our prejudices and our provinciality. Let the love that comes to us this day from those around us wash us clean of all that would be harmful to ourselves and others.

We lay before you the deep needs, both spoken and unspoken, that have been brought into this sanctuary. Grant us true penitence for our wrongdoing and strength for the weaknesses that cause others to enjoy life less. Where we are fickle, make us strong; where we feel powerless, empower us with your love. Minister to us this day, not according to our merit, but according to the riches of your good will and wisdom.

In the name of the Christ we pray, amen.