

August 12, 2007/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

### **Living by Faith (or, Faith Is a Verb!)**

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 (12:1-2) ...*let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith....*

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews invites us to remember those in the past who lived their lives by faith. The central concern of the writer is to lift up the life of faith as a journey to be undertaken by each of us in the here and now, and toward the future, following Christ alone.

“Faith” in the Letter to the Hebrews and throughout scripture means far more than holding onto religious ideas or beliefs. In fact, “faith” as it is used here has the “feeling” of a verb. It is not a verb, but a noun, *pistis*, which has shades of meaning—trust, reliability, solemn promise, confidence in God. Faith is a rooting of our lives in God and God’s promise of new life. Faith is also a moving into the future with hope and confidence.

First, the writer describes faith as an inward assurance of what we hope for. It is an inner confidence (or conviction, *hupostasis* in 11:1) in what we do NOT see, yet what is sure to come about. Faith is the deep insight that the world around us draws its life from what is not seen. If our confidence about life were attached to what we see and experience, we would be on a constant roller coaster ride. One moment, we see something good and hopeful, and our spirits soar. The next moment we experience something destructive, painful, or evil, and our spirits sink to the bottom. Faith is our capacity to perceive the deeper reality that is behind, beneath, and beyond all that we see and experience—God who called the world into being and who

continues to promise new life in the future. Faith, then, is a kind of solidity or firmness that comes from grounding our lives in God.

We see this kind of faith in young children. Jesus taught that the kingdom of God belongs to little children and we have to become like them if we want to know what it’s about. We were in touch with it as young children. Then it was reasoned out of us, covered over by the accumulated effects of all the nonsense and superficiality of our culture, or damaged by experiences of hurt or deprivation. Sofia Cavaletti, who created the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd upon which Children Worship & Wonder is based, tells of a young girl whose parents were not religious. The father was engaged in a conversation with his daughter that turned to where the world came from. Some people, said the father, believe that there is a God who made the world. He was simply explaining this without prejudice or comment. The little girl lit up and started dancing around the room, exclaiming “I KNEW IT, I knew it.” Young children know it. They are in tune. We need to listen to them and let them lead us back into this kind of faith as assurance of things unseen and hoped for.

Faith as confidence, trust, and inner assurance needs to be nurtured and cultivated in us. This is why it is important that we commit ourselves to what we call the inward journey. It is the work of re-awakening and deepening that inner confidence, that inward assurance and insight. We can’t look to someone else to give it to us. We can’t get it from sermons or books or anything else. We can’t live it vicariously through another person. We must look within ourselves. Jesus said that the kingdom is within us. And what could he mean but this re-awakening of our inner vision so that we see all of life, including ourselves, in relationship with

God, flowing from and back to God. That is why it is so important for us to practice daily times of silence, meditation, study, and prayer. It is to keep alive this faith as inner conviction of things unseen and hoped for. If we are constantly busy, on the run, or even engaged in many good works, we soon lose the undergirding of faith that gives a foundation and hope to our living, our actions. We need to keep coming back to our inward journey.

Now the writer proceeds to recite the history of faith through significant spiritual leaders of Israel. Abraham is called by God to live his life toward God's promise of a land and a people. By faith Abraham "sets out" for a place he knows nothing about, without a clue where he is going. An essential ingredient of the life of faith is "not knowing." We usually think that the most important thing is to have a lot of knowledge, to know exactly where we are headed. But if we read scripture closely, we see that the truly faithful people had no idea what they were doing or where they were going. They sensed a call in their lives, a kind of lure into the future, and they simply got up and went. Jesus' calling of the disciples happened exactly that way. He comes along one day, tells this tax collector or that fisherman to follow him, and without any discussion whatsoever, they get up, leave all their stuff, and follow him.

When it comes to the life of faith, our "knowing" gets in the way. Let me put it differently. If we are full, we have no room for God...full of ideas, full of self-importance or its opposite, full of opinions or full of activities so that there's no room for inner silence and listening, full of worries, anxieties, fears, or guilt. The only way to embark on life as a journey of faith is to become empty, to throw everything overboard. Here again, our inward journey, as individuals and as mission groups, is so important. We practice silence,

quieting ourselves, so that we can become aware of and let go of our attachments to whatever holds us back. We make ourselves empty enough to become responsive to God's call in our lives. Then we can keep moving forward, following that call as those who don't know where we are going.

Living by faith means letting go of the past, being spiritually aware and awake in the present, while leaning toward the future. When we give ourselves to a particular mission, we may glimpse in some way what it is to be, responding to a particular need. But when we give ourselves to it, we learn to let go, to trust, to keep ourselves open to what God will make of it. We did not know exactly what the Festival Center would become when we began to meet as a mission group four years ago. We had a vague sense of it, a glimpse of the promise, as Hebrews says. Our inward journey as a group and as individuals has been to remain open, not clinging to our own ideas or plans or trying to copy something else. We have had to perceive as we go what God is doing through us. We did not envision a group for middle and senior high girls, but that's what happened. We did not know the garden would become the Children's Garden where children would touch the soil, discover earthworms, plant seeds, and just enjoy the flowers. We did not plan to have three AA groups meeting at the center, but that's what God brought us. We did not envision many of the things that have emerged for us to perceive and respond to.

It is the same with Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center. I did not envision one day meeting Phil Boyce, a former lawyer, now advocate for children and program director of Camp KBY, and a Zen Buddhist who glimpsed the same vision. We did not know who would respond with a commitment to a mission group around establishing the retreat center. We did not know the way L'Arche would

become so supportive of Chrysalis by using the center as a place of respite for assistants and a guest area for those visiting the L'Arche community. Or the girls' group from the Festival Center coming for overnight retreats. It all has to do with not knowing where you are going and keeping open to God's leading.

This journey of faith is a life-long adventure that never ends. Even as we age and physical limitations set in, it ain't over! Abraham was too old to have children and Sarah was barren. But Abraham still meditated on God's faithfulness and God's promise of new life. Abraham was "good as dead," when his life bore the fruit of future generations of people of faith. Paul wrote that "though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day." Keeping spiritually alive, nurturing and living out of faith as trustful openness to God, will bear fruit right to the end, no matter what our condition.

Finally, in the beginning of the twelfth chapter, after taking us through a history of those who took this journey of faith, the writer brings it home. We are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, those who have taken this journey of faith. Now it is up to us. We are to let go of everything that weighs us down, every weight and sin. That is, anything that keeps us from being alive in the present and living toward the future following Christ. The writer calls Jesus the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith." This image of Christ has become for me the most compelling of all the images of Christ in the Christian scriptures. This image of Jesus resonates vividly with our community here. He is the one who goes before us, blazing the trail, leading the way. Not doing it for us, but going ahead of us, showing us how it is done, so to speak. He shows us how to live fully in the present with gratitude to God, receiving God's life-giving love,

and how to move forward to fulfill what God is calling us to be and do today and in the future.

That is what we are about according to the vision of the Church of the Covenant. We are a community of faith, faith as a journey of inward and outward movement. Not clinging to the past, but receiving a heritage of faith as inner confidence and trustful living. Each of us seeking what God is calling us to be and to do at each stage of our lives. Emptying ourselves so that we become channels of what God wants to do today and tomorrow through our lives as individuals and our life together as a community. Following the living Christ, who keeps teaching and showing us what the life of faith is about, who goes ahead of us and yet with us.