

Living Faith

Hebrews (11:1-3) 12:1-2

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....

“Faith” in the Letter to the Hebrews, and throughout scripture, does not mean holding to particular religious ideas or beliefs. In Hebrews, “faith” is more like a verb. Faith is something you DO, not something you THINK or BELIEVE. Faith is a way of living. The word the writer uses (*pistis*) has a richness of meaning—trust, reliability, solemn promise, confidence in God. Faith is grounding our lives in God and God’s promise of new life for us and the world. It is living in the present and toward the future with openness, hope and confidence, in spite of how difficult or dismal things seem at the moment.

The writer describes faith as an inner confidence (or conviction, *hupostasis* in 11:1) in what we do not see, yet what is promised. Faith is also an awareness that the world around us draws its life from what is not seen. If our confidence about life is attached to what we see and experience, we find ourselves on a constant roller coaster ride--up one moment, down the next, depending on whether an experience is positive or negative, sublime or painful. Faith perceives the deeper reality that is beyond and yet throughout all that we see and experience, what we call God, who called the world into being and who continues to call forth new life. Faith, then, is a kind of solidity or firmness that comes from grounding our lives in God as we live through the changes and challenges of life.

Last week the work group from Putnam Valley, NY, completed two major projects for us. The first was the creation of an interfaith prayer circle where the old water fountain used to be. There are four planters of varying heights standing together, upon which are mounted prayers from different spiritual traditions--Christian, Jewish, Sufi(Muslim), Buddhist, Native American. Jim Herward, Hannah's husband, came by Friday afternoon. After looking at the prayer circle, he commented, "You know, they are all saying the same thing!" Yes, the deepest spiritual wisdom of the religious traditions is that the physical, material world in which we live and of which we are part is enveloped and given life by what is unseen, the spiritual source of life. All spiritual traditions, at their best, tell us that, and seek to help people live in ways that express that awareness.

Faith as confident, trustful living needs to be nurtured and cultivated in us. This is why it is crucial that we commit ourselves to what we call the inward journey. It is the ongoing, daily work of re-awakening and deepening the life of faith. 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 each look within ourselves and the reality and uniqueness of our own lives. Jesus said that the kingdom is within us. I think he meant at least this, that we have it within us to see all of life, including ourselves, in relationship with God and to live harmoniously with that knowledge. We practice daily times of silence, meditation, study, and prayer to awaken and deepen faith as this way of seeing and living. If we are constantly busy, on the run, or even engaged in many good works, we easily lose touch with the undergirding of faith that gives a foundation, direction, and hope to our living, our actions. We need to keep coming back to our inward journey, from action to reflection, from activity to rest, from speaking to silence, from outwardness to inwardness.

The best way to know what faith is is to look at someone who is LIVING faith. So the writer points to those whose lives were a journey of faith. Abraham. Moses. A whole list of prophets and kings. Men and women, well known or unknown, who lived their lives with the kind of vision and trust and confidence the writer is talking about, many of whom suffered and struggled much in the process. There have been countless people who in countless ways lived their lives with openness to God, doing what they felt God called them to do, looking toward God's promise of new life.

So then the writer says: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let US now let go of everything that clings to us,(or to which we cling!), and run with perseverance the race that is laid out before us. And as we do this, we can look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the one who has gone before us, blazing the trail, showing how it's done, facing all the challenges and obstacles that we face, and more.* The writer is convinced that as we live our lives this way, we will experience the same new life that Jesus

experienced. Suffering becomes the doorway to healing. Struggle gives way to greater peace and wholeness. Letting go of attachments and encumbrances frees us to live more simply and trustingly. Dying is the gateway to life. We will find a way out of no-way, when we live with the openness, trust, and perseverance of faith.

The Church of the Covenant, from the beginning, has seen that "church membership" as commonly practiced is a very pale reflection of the life to which Jesus calls us. That is why we believe it important to offer a community in which persons, starting with ourselves, can make the kind of commitment to their own spiritual life that makes their lives into a life-long journey of faith, the kind of faith the writer of Hebrews is talking about. As we make that commitment, and work each day with the things that deepen and nourish us as persons of faith, and as we undertake the things we feel called to do in service to God's people and God's world, we begin to understand that we are not alone. We are surrounded by all of those who have lived their lives this way, who have gone before us. They are with us, helping and encouraging us. The writer is not talking about a Hall of Fame of religious and moral superstars. The writer is talking about a surrounding presence of everyone, past and present, and we might say, future, who has struggled with this thing of living by faith. What they did, big or small, is not the point. Whether they were famous or unknown except by God, does not matter. The thing is that there have been people through the ages who have seen life and lived life in this way. And they are with us and are helping us.

Hannah Herward is with us, helping us. She is part of that great cloud of witnesses. Hannah came to us about three years ago, looking for a community of faith in which she could come to terms with what it meant for her to be living with cancer. She began to work with the spiritual practices by which we define membership. She took them to heart, and they became for her a means of touching the deepest reality of her life--her relationship with the living God whose love for us has nothing to do with how much we accomplish or how perfectly we perform our jobs or obligations or whatever. Hannah found through her inward journey her spiritual home, not just the Church of the Covenant, but her own life in its relationship with God. She said as much to me at one point, that she had the feeling of coming home. She said the same thing, in a different way and meaning, when I talked with her a few days before her death. She felt at peace and that she was, indeed, going home.

When Hannah lost her hair because of chemotherapy, she asked me whether or not she should come to worship. She worried that others would feel uncomfortable. I assured her that such a thing is not a problem among our little crowd. So she came, with or without her ball cap. And when she came home for the last time from UVa Hospital, with a tube in her nose and other medical encumbrances, she was determined to come to worship at least one more time. Again, she asked if it would be too uncomfortable for others. She was able, with the help of her husband and children, to come to worship two times before she grew too weak.

The depth of commitment and desire that Hannah brought to her spiritual life will continue to inspire and encourage me. Do we live out of that deep desire and longing to be at worship with this, our community, so that there is almost nothing that would keep us away? For how many of us is our daily practice of the inward journey a matter of greatest urgency and eagerness, and thus a source of ongoing growth in the life of faith? I don't ask these questions to arouse feelings of guilt. I ask them of us, particularly Covenant and Community Members, so that we recognize in Hannah one, who though she was with us a relatively brief time, grasped fully and deeply what we are about, took it to heart, and was able to run the race that was set before her. We were part of the great cloud of witnesses surrounding her, and she is part of the great cloud of witnesses surrounding and encouraging us.

Hannah continued to give and serve, though unable to do so in the ways she had felt called when she shared with us her commitment to Covenant Membership. In collaboration with Sandy Fisher, Hannah envisioned the creation of a children's butterfly garden and made a gift to underwrite it. It was to be a place for butterflies, which she deeply loved, and where children could be enfolded by beauty and feel safe. Her grandmother's garden had been such a place for her as a child. That was the second project the work group brought into being.

When the work group arrived on Saturday, a week ago, I shared with them about Hannah. Sandy talked with them about the garden. On Monday, the group started to work on the garden as well as the prayer circle. Hannah was moving closer to her "coming home," and was, I am sure, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses helping her with that journey. Monday night, the group learned of Hannah's death, and the next morning the energy and love and commitment started to flow mostly to the children's butterfly garden. By the end of the week, it was pretty much done. These adults and young people had never met Hannah, but they felt that they

knew her, as they told Hannah's husband Jim and her daughter Megan when they came on Thursday morning to meet the group and see the garden. Thank yous and tears and hugs and smiles were shared all around that morning. And butterflies were coming to the garden.

All I can say is that throughout this past week or so, I have seen and experienced more fully that faith is something we live. We all experienced the reality of that great cloud of witnesses, what it means to be part of it, what it means to be helped by it. We were LIVING the words of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews more than understanding them in our heads. And that's the way it is meant to be. I want to say to the unknown writer of the Letter to the Hebrews that now I get it...or at least I am getting closer.