

What's Faith Got to do With It?

This is the second week that we've had a long story about *faith* from the New Testament Book of Hebrews. We don't know who the author of Hebrews is, someone who knew Paul and preached with him, Timothy perhaps. But whoever he was, this writer understands *faith* and the trouble that I have with it.

Let's listen to this list again of what was done *by faith*. *By faith* the Israelites passed through the Red Sea like it was dry land out of generations of slavery in Egypt. They simply got up and walked out to freedom. Regular people, having faith, did an extraordinary thing. *By faith* the walls of Jericho fell to a small band of Hebrews wandering in the desert. In last week's Epistle Reading from the book of Hebrews Abraham set out into the desert, living in a tent. He believed God's promise. He believed that his elderly wife Sara would give birth. And he would become the father of a nation. And it came to pass. *Faith* led the ancestors to strike out to the unknown, relying only on God's promise. And, with God's help, they accomplished wonders.

After rattling off these impressive examples of faith, the author of Hebrews throws down a challenge:

“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.”

Let us also like this cloud of witnesses set aside the weights and run the race set before us. But how? And what *exactly* are we supposed to do?

Let's start by looking at *faith*. What is it? How do we get it? How do we use it? To paraphrase a popular oldie song- “What's *faith* got to do with it?”

To tell the truth, when I hear such a stress on faith, I worry about two things. First I worry that someone will ask me to suspend my God-given intellect and “have faith’ in the impossible.” Remember Peter Pan? There is a revival of that play here in town. Remember the part where Peter asks Wendy, and all the audience, to

believe that they can fly.... with pixie dust! And the magic “works” when the children and the audience truly believe that it will work?

Don't tell me that *faith* is like that: magic that works if you believe it. And I certainly don't agree with the converse, that if your prayer doesn't work, it is because your faith is not strong enough.

In popular culture many people think that science presents an intellectual challenge to faith. People think that you should not believe anything you cannot prove. And this rational-historical-critical approach was adopted by many scientists in the early 20th century. But since then, science has moved on. In a recent lecture at The General Seminary in New York City The Rev. Dr. John Polkinghorne, the celebrated quantum physicist who is also an Anglican priest, talked about the limitations of science. He says that over ninety percent of the universe consists of “dark matter” which we know almost nothing about. Science is limited. Furthermore, science does not have the tools to prove or disprove questions of God's existence. Science tells us how but not why, says Polkinghorne.

But science *can* tell us something about God's character in one important respect. And this brings us back to *faith*. Science itself operates on the basis of *faith*. *Faith*, the word used by the author of Hebrews, is the Greek word *pistis*, meaning “conviction of the truth of something.” It means “reliance” or “consistency.” Science relies on consistency. It goes forward, in faith, relying on consistency as a basis for discovery. And that is something we know about God's character. It does not change. We know that God's character is consistent. From a position of *faith*, relying on God's consistency, we can find out more about God and God's character.

Now the second thing that worries me about faith is more personal. What does it mean to be faithful to a God who allows suffering? The Hebrews were slaves before they escaped. My ancestors were enslaved in this country starting in the 1700s. This country is still suffering from the legacy of slavery. What does it mean to be faithful to a God who permits such awful suffering to those who believe in Him?

Professor Karen Baker-Fletcher, Womanist theologian and professor of Religion at Goucher College, takes up this question in her book, **What's Faith Got to Do**

with It? She says that the fact that Jesus suffered on the cross does not in any way condone suffering. Jesus' suffering is meaningful only in the context of His life and resurrection. Jesus' resurrection overcomes and breaks the cycle of suffering and death.

Faith helps us look for and recognize the God who rejects and overcomes suffering. As resurrection people we are called to condemn suffering wherever we see it. Whatever the cause, whether the suffering is from the after-effects of slavery that we see in segregated neighborhoods and unequal education, or in our homes from our treatment of one another, we are called to condemn it.

Professor Luke Timothy Johnson, of Chandler School of Theology at Emory University tells us that a person of faith "lives as though seeing things that others do not." *Faith* propels us to look for an ongoing relationship with our living God. Our God, our living, loving God wants to be in relationship with us and communicates with us on an ongoing basis. We understand this from the many long stories in the book of Hebrews about the "cloud of witnesses" who acted by *faith*.

But sometimes faith can lead us to unexpected places. And now we come to the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus says, "I have come to set one against the other!"

Well, this certainly has been the case with the Anglican Communion. Why do we fight so much? And so publicly? Is the denomination falling apart? How can we have faith when there is tension in the Communion?

Professor James Terrell, of Sewanee, The University of the South, criticizes the Archbishop of Canterbury for "allowing" the disagreements to go on. In a recent article in the *Anglican Theological Review*, Terrell urges the Archbishop to weigh in on the issues. He says dismissively that the most important thing to Rowan Williams is keeping the Anglican Communion together.

But I would argue that the Communion, this community, with all its dissension and tension, is the hallmark of the living God. Jesus came to set one against another *in community*, together to question, to challenge and to discern God's call. In our

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Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

liturgy and in our practice and in our lesson today we affirm this cloud of witnesses, this community of saints who, through faith-filled relationship with God followed where the Spirit leads. They did not go alone. They did not go blindly or unreasonably, but in community, by faith.

This is the challenge of Hebrews for us: to do the same. To run the race. To take on our spiritual journey. To set out in relationship with God. To continue in *faith*, relying on God's consistency and love for us. And through the power of the Holy Spirit to follow the path of our Lord, perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ.

Amen.