

Hebrews 11: 29-12:2
August 14, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

For me, the critical lines in this passage are the last verses of chapter eleven:

Yet all of these, though they were commended for their faith did not receive what was promised. Since God had provided something better, so they would not *apart from us* be made perfect.

The author of Hebrews has begun this chapter with the great affirmation that “faith is the assurance of what we hope for, the conviction of what we do not see.” He then piles on example after example of biblical heroes who contended for their faith, suffering extraordinary hardships, accomplishing great tasks and miracles, dying for their faith in order to carry forward a promise given by God.

To the writer of Hebrews, these women and men are great but not for all their accomplishments. They are great because they believed in a promise from an invisible God and followed it wherever it led because they considered God to be faithful in his promise. They trusted that, even though the outward evidence of life did not often confirm the promises, God’s faithfulness did not depend on the events going on around them. In the words of the apostle Paul, they “hoped against hope,” that is they had faith despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Thus for the writer of Hebrews, their faith, demonstrated in their courageous belief in and obedience to God’s promise against all the outward evidence that makes them worthy. It is their faith that God’s promise is worthy of living and dying for that makes them inspirational for future generations.

Then comes this remarkable statement: “Yet all of these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised.”

Isn't there something unfair about this? Shouldn't we be rewarded for doing the right thing? Shouldn't there be some reward for being faithful in the midst of corruption, violence and Godless-ness? As many people have asked over the years, “Why be good?”

It's a good question. In many ways in our day and age it could be *the* question. Each of us needs a personal answer; and as a community of faith we would do well to find a community answer.

I propose two provisional answers and a qualification. The qualification is this: There is no such thing as “being good.” Being good is not a biblical concept. It is a means by which societies create order. Being good means obeying the law. It means being honest. It means playing fairly and not using others to gain an advantage. Being good means conforming our behavior to the society's definition of what being good means.

By contrast, the Bible teaches us to be faithful to God. This means conforming our lives to God's standards. People who seek to be faithful to God above all human law and conventions frequently are in trouble. In today's world the rule is the same as it was in the Roman Empire. Don't cause trouble and you will not experience trouble. Yet by their very nature secular societies have no higher aim than social order.

If we truly have faith—the faith described by the Bible in general and Hebrews in particular, we don't just “have faith.” It is not a virtuous quality. It is not optimism or belief in a cause. It is not something we *have*. Faith is the distinguishing characteristic of who we *are*. *We are* people of faith. Faith is the deepest source of every significant decision we make.

Why be good? The first answer is easy. As people of faith who are members of a wide variety of communities, being good—that is, obeying the laws of the land and living moral and ethical lives, is simply the right thing to do. In the mass killings and random shootings, the targeting of police and the rapid disappearance of any middle ground of civil discussion we catch a terrifying vision of life without a commonly accepted commitment to what our founding leaders called the “common wealth,” what social philosophers have called “the social contract” where each individual gives up the absolute right to do whatever he or she wants whenever he or she wants to do it in order that all people can have access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. What makes our country great is the system of laws that do not allow one culture, one race, religion, economic or political ideology to define and determine the destiny of the whole community. In so far as we gather under the protection of the laws of this land we are bound to promote the values that sustain the common good.

But if we stop at being good and responsible members of society we are not living the life of faith. We have a calling to a higher authority. We are called to believe that as great as our country may be the promise of God is vastly larger than any one nation. The Old Testament prophets consistently called kings and nations to account for putting power ahead of justice, security ahead of freedom, weapons ahead to trust in the Holy One. And that is why the great heroes of faith were often at odds with the society in which they lived. They saw the vision of God restoring of all people to right relationship with the love of the One who created the heavens and the earth. In the midst of great injustice and violence they looked to the love and peace of God. In the midst of natural calamities they looked to the care and protection of God. In the world where some lives always matter more than others, they looked to the One who

created all human beings with the ability to respond to God's love. The writer of Hebrews states that though they never saw the promise fulfilled in their lifetimes; they *lived in the trust that God is faithful. They lived as if they were the ones to bring God's promise into reality. And as a result the promise of God was carried forward to its fulfillment in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

But note now the second part of the statement. The writer of Hebrews states that while they did not receive what was promised God intends their faith to be *perfected in us*. What does this mean? Simply this, the faith of our ancestors has been handed to us. It is now our calling to be *people of faith!* It is our calling to live according to God's promise, the vastness of God's vision which Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

And so the question becomes, what will future generations say of us? Will we be a community satisfied to *be good?* Or will our faith cause us to witness to a much larger life, a deeper understanding? How will faith shape our deepest motivations and become inseparable from who we are and how we live? Are we willing, like the heroes of old to live with our eyes lifted to the God of all humanity revealed to us in Jesus and to be satisfied with being faithful even if all the evidence mocks our hope? Are we willing to accept that this promise, while fulfilled in Christ will not be manifest completely on earth in our lifetimes and yet carry the faith forward to another generation?

In this we are not alone. The writer of Hebrews pictures all who have gone before us filling the great coliseum like the one in Rio. They are cheering as we stumble in having run the race of faith and not given up. From their shouts and cheers we receive that last burst of energy which carries us home. May it be so. Amen.