

Hebrews 11: 1-40
October 14, 2012
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

As exciting and rewarding as it is, traveling for any extended length of time is tiring business. This is especially true when travelling with a tour director. Your time is not your own. Time and time again we were led through the sites of ancient cities where the apostle Paul walked and preached. We longed to pause long enough to breathe the air Paul breathed and to imagine how the cities now ruined or over grown with great cities appeared in Paul's day. But this was not to be. There was a schedule. Even in the bus there was rarely time for quiet as we were told about the historic land through which we were travelling and the rich traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy which continue to enrich the faithful today.

On Friday at 3:15 am we boarded the bus to begin our journey home. To say that we were tired is an understatement. About two hours away from New York we were served a snack which included a portion of ice cream. It was delicious! When my row mates and I read the ingredients we were tickled to find that the last ingredient bore an obscure but delightfully appropriate name: *exhausted vanilla beans*.

What is an exhausted vanilla bean? We spent 15 wonderful minutes imagining vanilla beans so tired that they just tumbled in to the pot of cream and sugar in order to find oblivion in the larger concoction. We understood those exhausted vanilla beans—*we were those exhausted vanilla beans!*

Yesterday morning when I sat down to write this sermon, I looked up the root meaning of the word "exhaust". It comes from the Latin *ex haurire* which literally means to "draw out."

Thus an exhausted vanilla bean is one whose vital properties have been drawn out to contribute to the creation of the ice cream.

I begin this way because we sometimes speak of life as *exhausting*. We experience the life as drawing out from us all of our life energy until there is nothing left. We feel like fields that are planted year after year without fertilizer. The nutrients are gone. There is nothing to nourish another crop.

And so it is that we arrive on Sunday morning often mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted: What do we need from God? What is the purpose of the worship service? How do you want to feel when the service is over?

I take it for granted that this is what you do *not* want:

You do not want to be told that you are a miserable sinner.

You do not want to be reminded of all the ways you fall short.

You do not want to feel obligated to squeeze out whatever fragmentary inner resources are left by doing one more thing—especially giving more money to the church.

So then, instead, what might you hope to receive from this sacred time in God's presence?

Many of you speak of worship as a time when you get your gas tank refilled or your batteries recharged. What you are saying to me is that through coming together for worship the life that has been depleted by the week is restored. To return to the agricultural image, the nutrients which grow a healthy plant are restored. You regain a sense of hope. You regain a sense that God sees you and loves you and cares for you. You regain a sense that the circumstances of your life and in the life of the world can be faced with God's help. You can move through fearful and draining times with confidence that all will be well. When worship

is the vehicle of this gift we move out with a deep sense that, although we cannot *see* the ultimate outcome of our lives we have the sense that all will be well. All will be well because in coming into God's presence we hear the Gospel message that Christ has overcome the powers of death. And when we hear and trust the message that Christ *has overcome* the powers of death then, if only for a moment we experience that right here and right now *we are well*. This is not some future promise only but a *present* reality. The evidence is God's love in Jesus Christ which is available to you all the time, but especially right now.

What I am describing to you is what the writer of the book of Hebrews calls faith: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The Greek word being translated literally means that which undergirds, like the foundation of a building. Jesus calls faith the "rock" on which he will build the community of faith. Thus it might be more forceful and accurate to translate the verse to say that faith is the rock foundation which gives us the assurance or confidence that what we hope for will come about even when there is no visible evidence right now.

Faith is the bone deep trust that despite all the outward circumstances and all the things that frighten me all is well with me. I am safe in God's hands and there is now nothing to hold me back from living a full and faithful life. Even death which seems so final and tragic is powerless over life. In short faith is the liberating realization that there is nothing of which I need be afraid, why? Because God in Jesus Christ is *with* me. God in Jesus Christ is with *you*. God in Jesus Christ is with *us*. We are a community *of faith!* We are a community governed by the trust that all will be well and indeed *in Christ IS WELL!*

Thus it is that the writer piles up example of the inevitable consequences of this profound and liberating faith. There is a recurring and rhythmic phrase: "By faith Abel offered...; by

faith Abraham obeyed...; by faith Moses was hidden...; by faith Moses refused to be considered a son of the Pharaoh...; by faith the people crossed the Red Sea. Do you get the connection? Faith is the inspiration for all of God's activity. Faith is the assurance that even though you and I may never see the fulfillment of our hopes we move with the confidence that God in Christ has destined God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In the community *of faith* there is no room for fear based decision making. Instead, in a community of faith we are inspired to embark on two simultaneous journeys. One is the journey inward to seek to receive every day the encouragement and refreshment of God through the Holy Spirit. We ask God to restore to us the resources that are drawn out through our daily life so that we are not exhausted. Indeed we are enlivened in even the most routine of daily activities. By faith our "have to's" are transformed into "get to's".

Simultaneous with this interior journey is the going out into the world to bear Good News. We do not have to force ourselves to do it. We do not to be guilt tripped into it. Carrying Good News is the natural and spontaneous outcome of a living faith. We will find ourselves doing it. And so it can be said that whatever we do as individuals and as a community of faith, we are motivated by the power of hope which is the confidence that in Jesus Christ, God has indeed overcome evil and death. It is more than a belief. It is a way of life.

And this spiritual attitude is nowhere more important than in our giving of money to support Christ's ministry in and through this congregation. However much we give, is our giving an expression of faith? It is the outcome of a bedrock trust that in Jesus Christ we are well and that we desire, with Jesus, that all the world discover that they are safe in Christ's

tender hands? Is there therefor joy in giving because we are sharing our faith with people around the world and in our own local community?

I pray that when you are considering your support for Christ's ministry the answer will be a resounding "yes"! And that in the days to come you will not be like the poor exhausted vanilla beans, but will be continually refreshed and renewed in your life...by faith. Amen.