

Proper 14 - 11 Pentecost – Year C – August 8, 2010
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40
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Some of you have heard of the Myers-Briggs personality test. It examines four different aspects of our personalities, and combines the results into a composite profile. One of the four elements describes two very different poles of the same scale. On one end there are the folks who enjoy a kind of open-ended decision making process. They are happiest when living in the realm of multiple possibilities, and they tend to lean towards procrastination. On the other end of the same scale, there are those who tend to collect the facts before making a decision, and then decide on a course of action relatively swiftly. They are generally uncomfortable in the kind of open-ended fuzziness that allows their opposite numbers to thrive.

Quizzes and books tend to give us a peek around the corner or a glimpse into the room, rather than coming close to full insight, as in a glorious Technicolor vista. There are many things in life that have to be experienced and lived out for us to really understand them. All the themes from this portion of the letter to the Hebrews are intangible: love and faith, obedience and trust. Yet, just like God's steadfast faithfulness, Jesus' immeasurable love for each of us, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, which are intangible in the strictest rational and scientific sense, but are more real than anything else we will ever know or perceive in our lives. The writer of Hebrews has chosen to give us a brief definition of faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Does that mean we are deluding ourselves with our love of God and God's Word, believing in what scoffers might call blind faith? The same scoffers may also want to tell us that faith is just an antidote to reality, belief in spite of the evidence all around us. Is that really what our reading says?

In the Greek, the word faith has dynamic nuances, embracing loyalty and trust, holding hands with fidelity, and embodying such confidence that we are able to trust our whole lives to God. There are plenty of physical phenomena in the world that we do not question, but that we cannot actually see, except perhaps in consequence. We cannot see the wind, only how the wind bends the trees, lifts the tiles off our roof, or gathers up the dandelion seeds into its invisible breath. We know that the wind is real, and in the same way, we know that faith is real, because faith too has visible consequences. God's gift of faith in Christ Jesus changes us. Our faith results in an ongoing transformation of our hearts and minds, and of our words and deeds, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The results of our faith are all around us. Here's just one example. The rummage sale was an enormous success because faith-filled lovers of our unseen God brought all kinds of gifts, sorted, set up, cooked, baked, and helped at the sale. In turn, we are now able to reach out and bless others both near and far. Faith is not abstract; it is a vital reality in the lives of Christians, in your life and mine. Faith is simply another way that we perceive reality. Faith is the gift of access for all God's children to divine knowledge and divine power.

The writer of Hebrews does not leave us with his or her definition of faith stuck to the pages of a book. Whatever we may read or write *about* faith, the reality is that faith is vibrant. Faith is alive. Faith motivates. And so our author gives us concrete examples of faithfulness in action. When we read the stories of our Spiritual predecessors in Scripture, we realize that we are part of the incredible ongoing history of God's gift of faithfulness. Our lives are part of a much longer and broader story. Our journeys of faith are woven into a vast narrative history under our loving God's gentle guidance, and abundant providence. In this portion of Hebrews, we hear about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. In other portions of the letter to the Hebrews, there are mini-histories of Abel, Enoch and Noah. In the broader sweep of Scripture, we can see that these are not random selections from our faith history. The ancestral greats that are named fall into four clustered groups. Each group has two or more witnesses that testify under Jewish Law to prove the case for faith, if you like. Each of the groups foreshadows one of the virtues or elements of faithfulness that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. There are the witnesses to righteousness. There are the lifelong testimonies of

those who journeyed obediently in faith according to God's will. And there are those who remain faithful to God despite suffering and trials. The last group of exemplars is those who blend the three virtues of faith. They include, the Israelites passing through the Red Sea on dry ground, and Rahab, a prostitute and gentile who is faithful to her promise, and helps the Hebrew spies to escape. This host of witnesses also includes all who have suffered or been persecuted for their faith. Even in modern times, there are faithful witnesses who have died rather than deny God in Christ Jesus. Consider the terrible tragedy of the teenagers whose faith in God was tested at the wrong end of a gun barrel during the Columbine High School shootings, just a few years ago.

Reality tells us that it can take a lot more courage to remain as a faithful servant of Christ in a community of faith, living under the shadow of the cross, as Christ Himself lived, than to set aside the challenges of living in faith, and just do our own thing. It may seem that a life outside of the Body of Christ is much easier, but it isn't. As we saw last week from Luke's Gospel, God's definition of a fool is one who thinks that they can live apart from God, and God's people. Despite the struggles we all face, and sometimes because of our differences: differences in our personality types; differences across the whole spectrum of beliefs; differences of where we are on our spiritual journeys; knowing and loving Christ Jesus is worth it all, because it is the greater reality of God's truth. Living in the Word, is how we learn to live graciously and patiently, rather than selfishly and foolishly.

This portion of Hebrews focuses particularly on those who journeyed in obedience to God's will, and lived as sojourners in the land. They lived in tents, always ready to pick up and move, always looking forward in faith to the city of God, our eternal home. Did you have some kind of emotive reaction to the thought of living in tent or living a nomadic lifestyle? Personally speaking, I cringed when I read that Abraham and Sarah lived for years in tents. You and God all know how much I loathe camping! Yet interestingly enough, my own faith journey has consisted in a significant amount of literal relocation, and physical movement across a variety of geographic locales. For those of you who really enjoy camping, consider how your life of faith and obedience to God is reflected in this God-given gift? We're not talking here about your annual vacation, but how this aspect of your faithful obedience to God translates from your spiritual life into your mission and witness to Christ in the way you live. Perhaps others see it as a deep and abiding spirit of adventure and preparedness, irrespective of what the world throws your way. Or maybe it is seen in the gift of generosity; because God knows you travel light, and don't crave for more than the necessities of life with just a few home comforts. Maybe the testimony of your life is in creating warmth and hospitality with simple grace and no pretensions. If you are a camper, then you are also a model of great trust in God's protection and provision. In other words, your life is a witness to graceful dependence on God, and you are always ready for mission.

If camping is not your thing, then your life of faithful obedience will be revealed to the world in different ways. Is it that you are a witness of obedience and trust in God's power to create life and hope from hopelessness and despair? Abraham and Sarah trusted God's promise to give life and a future for Israel even in their old age. What miracles of God's grace are you sharing by simply living in deference to God's will? It may be in our concreteness that our lives reflect the building of foundations of peace and justice, or other structures of God's kingdom on earth. For all of us, our greatest joy is in loving and laughing together, in supporting one another through all the trials of life, and in celebrating the diversity of God's good gifts in our common life of faith and obedience to God. Someone once said, "It is not faith and works; it is not faith or works; it is faith that works." Or in the words of the marketing geniuses of a certain brand of athletic shoes: "Just do it!"

Amen.