

THE POWER OF FAITH

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Summer is that blessed time of the year when we can slow down and take it a little easier before the September windup to an active life again. It is a good time to sit on the porch or deck and reflect on our life and to make resolutions as to how we are going to control what goes on around us and not just be a victim. This time I will choose the pace I go and not have others do so for me.

Sounds very good does it not? But, is it feasible? Do I have the luxury of controlling all that goes on around me? If not, can I find some way to have a say in my life?

This has been a concern for men and women since the beginning of time. Do I have any control over what I do or over what comes at me from all directions? Surely I am not just a slave to circumstances alone with everything beyond my capacity to shape and change.

Now we all know there are givens in life, such as the country in which we were born, the socio-economic conditions of our parents and community, the opportunities we had for education, training and jobs, and the possibilities of developing our talents and skills. But these in themselves need not limit our ability to develop and grow.

Key to our sense of our ability to be a person of worth whatever our circumstances is our belief in ourselves and the value of life. Some of this feeling can be innate but so much of it is learned from the actions of others. It begins at the time of our birth and the care and attention we received. This has nothing to do with material things but rather has everything to do with the love we feel and the security of care from those around us.

So often we hear interviews with people, read biographies of well known people or we know from our own experience that when we were children, we did not know we were poor due to the loving care and the home which nurtured us. Surrounded by family and friends who valued us, we began to frame a sense of our own value in the world.

There is in most people an innate desire to love and be loved. We intuitively know that we were not born to be in isolation from others but rather born to be in relationship with those around us. We sense and experience the joy and the sorrow of being in community, for it is here that we live, work and play.

All through history and in every culture there is a constant active search for the meaning of life. Built in to men and women appears to be the search for meaning to make sense of what we are about. So vast is the wonder of it all that we assume rightly or wrongly that there must be a power beyond ourselves which created and directs life as we know it. And thus religions are born, some harsh and others based on love.

We in the Western world by and large are influenced by the events in Europe and the Middle East. Here for centuries people have sought a God who is both Creator and Lover,

a God who teaches and forgives, a God who leads while still allowing men and women the freedom to develop based on their own choices.

The Hebrews did not believe in a pantheon of gods who controlled everything. From the time of Abraham and Sarah, the picture of a single God took hold. Then the question was asked: what is this God like and what does God expect from us? Is our God manipulative and controlling or is our God in relationship with us, walking beside us as we live our life here on earth? The Hebrews rejected any sense that the God they followed was merely a puppeteer making all the decisions for us whether we were in agreement or not.

You recall the story of Abraham. As an older man, Abraham felt called by God to leave his lands and his countrymen and travel to a new land where God planned to create a people who would be in relationship with God in a loving and an instructional way. Abraham and family and retainers pack up and leave to face the adventures ahead.

For Abraham and his descendents, it became centuries of trying to understand all the dimensions of God. Their story is a story of a people in relationship with God and discovering over time what God was like. Sometimes they were committed to the worship of God and other times they slipped away far from God only to be called back again and again by the prophets.

In time the Creation story was told which summed up their belief that this world and the life thereon was not an accident in time but the result of a Creator God who willed it to be and saw that it was good.

The journey of the Hebrews is really everyone's story for people everywhere are very similar in needs and desires. Human relationships are rarely easy and never without bumps or hiccups. So it is with men and women's relationship with God, where we drift apart and come back together until we are fully committed to each other.

In our reading this morning from the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament, the writer speaks of faith, our faith in God. The writer said these words: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear."

To the writer to the Hebrews, faith is absolutely certain that what it believes is true and that what it expects will come. It is not a hope that looks forward with wistful longing; it is the hope that looks forward with utter conviction and certainty.

The theologian Barclay tells this story which illustrates this conviction of truth. In the early days of persecution of the Christian church, authorities brought a humble Christian before the judges. The man told the judges that nothing they could do could shake him or his faith because he believed that, if he was true to God, God would be true to him. "Do you really think," asked the judge, "that the likes of you will go to God and his glory?" "I do not think," said the man, "I know." It was this conviction which enabled the Christian

martyrs to face their death. Their very act of courage and conviction in the face of a certain brutal death led countless others to Christ, for they too were seeking a faith which convinced them of their value and worth before God.

The writer goes on to speak of Abraham's faith in God which led him to move he and his family to a new country in response to God's call. What was it about Abraham's faith that allowed him to take such a chance? After all, he was not even a young man but well up in years. What can we learn about faith from this story of Abraham's faith?

First, **Abraham's faith was the faith that was ready for adventure.** God's summons meant he had to leave home, friends and extended family and his business; yet he went. He had to go into the unknown; yet he went. Does it not make you wonder what will happen to us if we take God at his word and act as God commands and promises?

Bishop Newbigin tells of the negotiations which led to the formation of the United Church of South India. He had a share in these negotiations and participated in the long drawn out discussions. Things were often held up because people were cautious and wanted assurance at every step. In the end, the chairman reminded the negotiators that a Christian has no right to ask where he is going. It is sometimes necessary for the Christian to take the way to which the voice of God is calling him or her without knowing what the consequences will be. Like Abraham, we have to go out not knowing where we are going and place ourselves in God's hands.

The second thing about **Abraham's faith was the faith which had patience.** When he reached the promise land, he was not allowed to possess it immediately. He had to wander around in it. Abraham had the patience to go through what God had planned for him and never lose his faith.

We are so often in a hurry you and I. To wait is even harder than to adventure. The hardest time is always the time in between. At the moment of decision there is the excitement and the thrill; at the moment of achievement at the end there is the glow and glory of satisfaction. However, in the intervening time there is necessary the ability to wait and work and watch when nothing seems to be happening. It is then we are liable to give up our dreams and our hopes and lower our ideals and sink into an apathy whose dreams are dead.

Thus we can see that the man or woman of faith is the man or woman whose hope is flaming bright and whose effort is intensely strenuous even in the grey days when there is nothing to do but wait.

Finally, **Abraham's faith was the faith which was looking beyond this world.** No man or woman ever did anything great without a vision which enabled him or her to face the difficulties and discouragements on the way. God can not give us the vision unless we permit God to do so; but if we wait upon God, even in the earth's desert places, God will send us the vision and with it the toil and trouble of the way become all worth while.

So, the writer of Hebrews reminds us of the key qualities in Abraham's faith and holds open to all of us the possibility to grasp the faith of Abraham. These qualities you recall are: first, a faith ready for adventure; second, a faith which has patience; and third, a faith which looks beyond this world.

The writer of Hebrews believed this faith is open to all of us. It has the power to transform our lives and lead us to places we never dreamed to tread. The key word here is the power within a faith in God, a faith like Abraham's which hears a call to adventure with God and who responds to the call vigorously in the affirmative.

Now, I am not suggesting our call may be as momentous to the world as that of Abraham. However, our saying yes to God can and does open up our lives to new possibilities regardless of our age, our gender, our nationality or our health. It is never too late to throw ourselves open to God and to seek God's guidance for us.

Like Abraham, we need to be adventurous in our faith, we need to be patient in our faith and we need to have our eye set not only on life here to day but for all eternity.

The blessing for us as a seeking people today is the examples through history and the people we have met who have been willing to call on God's gift of faith. We too can and do reach out to God for it is never too late. God does not expect us to have our life in perfect order nor does God put us through a series of tests before deciding if we qualify to be in relationship together.

The picture I always see is that famous one of Jesus standing at the door, lantern in hand, knocking and requesting to come in. The door has no handle on the outside. The door only will open to his knock if we turn that handle, open the door and invite Jesus into our lives.

God comes to us always; it is our decision whether or not to allow God to be our partner and friend.

Opening that door to that knock begins one of the great adventures of faith we would never want to miss.

Amen