

Sharing visible signs of the grace of God

Hebrews 11: 1-3 Faith is ...

Psalm 33

The letter to the Hebrews is described in one of our Study Bibles as an anonymous treatise which is directed to those whose faith and practices are weakening, most likely written by someone a generation after the apostles and Paul. It was addressed to the people who had been subjected to persecution imprisonment and loss of property as a result of their faith these words from the letter to the Hebrews which we heard in our reading today are there to encourage the faithful followers of Christ.¹ These words, were meant as words of encouragement and strength that also echo the words that we hold onto as faithful followers in The United Church of Canada when we say, “We are not alone”.

So let’s talk about faith and as I mentioned before during the first part of our service sharing our faith with others is a risk. What is faith? According to the author of the letter to the Hebrews “faith is the assurance of things hoped for and a conviction of things unseen.” Now for many of us it’s easier to define what faith is not rather than what faith is. At a recent conference I attended one of the speakers Jason Santos said, “The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty.” I think this is reflected in the message from the Hebrews when it says “for what is not seen and what is hoped for”, is not certain, it is not tangible, it is not something we can prove. Faith is something we can share and talk about, but only if we are willing to take that risk. For like the Hebrews we too live in a time and space where we are often faced with ridicule where we face judgment. I can’t tell you the number of people who think I am a little crazy for what I do. We’ve moved into a time and space here in our world where places of faith are no longer true sanctuaries. The churches and places of faith throughout this world are experiencing and are targets of violence. I heard from a minister in the United States who said that to be at the pulpit is a scary thing especially right now and it’s the first time in their ministry where they felt unsafe because of what they might be called to say. So speaking about faith and proclaiming our faith is truly risky. So my question for you today is this: Where did you get your faith from? What brought you or caused you to believe?

¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, NSRV, p. 316.

There are those among us who are still questioning, who are seeking a sense of faith, and for those of you who are seeking it what drew you to be here today? For some it's something we've always had, faith is something we were brought up with. We attended church since we were children our family gave us a sense of our faith and our belief. For others it's not something we have ever had, but something for some reason drew us to seek a place of faith, to find that which is beyond us. For some we are here and we have faith and we believe because we have faced tragedy and difficult times in our lives and we needed and need support and unconditional love, a place where we can belong that will help us get through this difficult time. What I find most interesting is that for people regardless of whether you've always had faith or never had faith or you are somewhere in between in that spectrum, the common thread is the desire to live in relationship.

In The United Church of Canada we believe that "God's desire for relationship is found and cited as the source of creation and in the nature of the Holy Trinity."² We are in partnership. We say that God has created and is creating, that we are partners in this creation. We hear this in the words of one of our four statements of faith as I mentioned before in the United Church, and it begins with and ends with the words 'We are not alone'. That statement itself has been a great comfort to many people in our faith community. Now The United Church of Canada has several statements of faith. The first one when we came into union back in 1925 were 'The Twenty Articles of Faith', following that we had a 'Statement of Faith' in the 1940's, 'A New Creed', which is the one we typically hear in worship which was from 1968, and most recently 'A Song of Faith' which was written in 2006. Each statement has been written to reflect the times and how our faith is being expressed in this context and time that it was written. None replace the others, but add to the collective experience and understanding of our faith.

A statement of faith is a way of coming to a common understanding of what we believe as a collective group. A creedal statement I believe provides us with some defining lines or a container in which we can find our faith proclaimed. You know as well as I do that all the people sitting here amongst us and across this country and across the world are not all going to agree on every single word in that statement. In fact, it took a long time for the United Church to be formed because finding consensus is difficult. In 2006 when we adopted 'A Song of Faith' we argued over one word which was one letter. A Song of Faith or just *The Song of Faith*; each has different significance. Our statements of faith are our expression of faith reflected in the context within which we live and it's not a policy statement, but rather a statement that "is more descriptive than prescriptive, which is to say it does not claim to tell the church what it should believe; so much as it attempts to put forward an orderly and evocative way that the church seems to believe that based on its actions, its discourses and its relationship to the Christian tradition in general and its own history in particular."³ The United Church of Canada has a long

² A Song of Faith; A Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada, Appendix C, 2006

³ _____, Appendix A, 2006.

tradition of spiritual freedom and a statement of faith should not be seen in any way as a condition to membership in the United Church of Canada.

I invite you to turn now in the red hymn book 'Voices United' to page 918 which is where we find 'A New Creed'. This is one of the shortest statements of faith we have which is why I like it. It's easy to remember, it gives us a sense of where we are to go and what we are to believe. You will see that just above it we have the 'Apostle's Creed'. If you flip the page you will see the 'Nicene Creed'. There are many statements of faith, but with 'A New Creed' as I mentioned before, it starts with "We are not alone", and it ends with "We are not alone". The first section talks about the Trinity, it talks about what we believe about God; 'We believe in God who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new who works in us and others by the Spirit', that section is our understanding of the Trinity, the belief of the Trinity. And then we say 'We trust in God', and for me that is that leap of faith, that moment where we say I trust in God and so therefore I am going to live the rest of these statements out: that 'we are called to be a Church, to celebrate God's presence (which we are doing here today) to live with respect in Creation (which was added in later in the 80's,) to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil and to proclaim Jesus as crucified and risen' and it continues on. So that's one very condensed statement of faith.

In your bulletin today the Call to Worship, the Prayer of Illumination, the Commissioning and even our Offering Prayer are words that come from 'A Song of Faith.' A Song of Faith is more poetic. It's a statement as I said written most recently that tries to capture the diversity in our church and the pluralism in our society; also, the untameable nature of the Holy. The group which created this statement, which is a nice big booklet like this, sought an expression that would invite dialogue; a conversation starter rather than ender.⁴ That's why I asked you today to start to share your beliefs. I wanted to read the first section as it talks about God. Trinity Sunday there are many words that we use for God. This statement of faith begins:

God is Holy mystery,
beyond complete knowledge,
above perfect description.
Yet,
in love,
the one eternal God seeks relationship.
So God creates the universe,
and with it the possibility of being and relating.
God tends the universe,
mending the broken and reconciling the estranged.
God enlivens the universe,
guiding all things toward harmony any their Source.

⁴ A Song of Faith, Appendix B, 2006.

Grateful for God's loving action,
We cannot keep from singing.
With the church through the ages,
we speak of God as one and triune;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
We also speak of God as
Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
God, Christ and Spirit,
Mother, Friend, and Comforter,
Source of Life, Living Word, and Bond of Love.
and in other ways that speak faithfully of
the One on whom our hearts rely;
the fully shared life at the heart of the universe.
We witness to Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love.⁵

Friends faith is sometimes the hardest thing to describe and to share with another person partly because faith is often unseen. Hope is something we can't put our fingers on and yet we know it exists, we know it's out there and we have experienced those moments. So I hope that you'll remember we all have our own stories, they are all important. I encourage you to go home and write your own statement of faith for you right now in this moment. Who is God for you? How has Jesus made a difference in your life and where is the Holy Spirit at work amongst us, within us and in this world? For that is what will bring us hope even in times of great challenge and for this we give God thanks.

Amen.

⁵ A Song of Faith, 2006.