

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“By Faith”

Hebrews 11:1-16

Biblical scholars agree that he was a sincere, pious, disciplined Jewish Christian but other than that no one knows too much about the author of the letter to the Hebrews from which our epistle lesson for today is taken. We don't even know his name. Some have suggested that the author is Paul, others have said Barnabas and still others have offered Apollos as a possibility. But the fact of the matter is that we just don't know and, in the end, it really doesn't matter. We know it's God's Word.

But whoever he is, he writes with one purpose in mind – to encourage his fellow Christians to hold fast to their faith in Christ Jesus and to not give up their hope in him no matter what. He warns, threatens, pleads, encourages, and interprets Old Testament Scripture, all in order to persuade his readers that the promise made by God to Abraham has now been fulfilled in the person and work of His Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. They stand, he says, on the border of the new Promised Land. And so, he says, hang on, it won't be long now. Remember what was accomplished by grace through faith in the past. And now, in chapter eleven, he sets the parade of the faithful in motion – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. He goes on to mention Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David and Samuel. In fact, he says, he doesn't have time to mention them all. Finally he concludes, as J.B. Phillips says in his paraphrase, “surrounded then as we are by these ranks of witnesses, let us strip off everything that hinders us, as well as the sin which dogs our feet, and let us run the race that we have to run with patience, our eyes fixed on Jesus, the source and goal of our faith!”

It's that faith, the writer insists, that is crucial to the Christian life. Of course, this faith is more than just knowing the answers to religious questions. There is that, but it's more than that. If it's a real faith it is more than mere knowledge, it's putting that knowledge into practice in life. Webster defines faith as “a willful, willing commitment, a deliberate act of putting one's self, without reservation into the care and keeping of another.” Faith is not the opposite of knowledge, as some might suppose, it is trust based on knowledge – personal, complete and fulfilling. Faith is, as someone has said, like going home after a long journey. A fellow pastor once likened it to an experience he had in World War II. He was lost, he said, fearfully and desperately lost on the wrong side of the Rhine River but then, without exactly knowing how, he found himself back on a familiar road. Like a weight being lifted from his shoulders, he said, he knew where he was and the way he had to go. “This is the road,” he said to himself and then he proceeded to follow it home. You see, it wasn't a matter of mere knowledge. It was a matter of trust. And so, in faith, the author of today's lesson calls upon Christians to say of Christ, “This is the road, the way home” and saying that, follow him.

But there's more. The author sees something else – not so much an element of faith as perhaps a consequence of faith. Faith, he says, that is grounded in knowledge and lived out in trust is also a witness to others. Lived out in day to day activities, faith bears witness to all whom it touches

that the Christian is one for whom life has meaning and purpose and direction no matter what the circumstances of that life may be. He saw this witness in what has been called the Old Testament “heroes of faith.” And it’s that witness which he calls for all who follow Christ to emulate. He reminds his readers that the world in which we live can and needs to see a difference in the attitude and words and deeds of those who are called Christians. Not that they are perfect, but rather that they trust Christ.

That knowledge, that trust, that witness, implies obedience to the word and will of God, for as it is written, “be doers of the Word and not hearers only.” This doing of the Word is what the Christian life is all about – doing in the big things of life, doing in the little things of life, doing in all things in life – doing it all according to God’s word and will.

As those who have gone before us in the faith are witnesses to us, so also we are called to be witnesses to those who come after us in the faith. And so we ask ourselves, what kind of witnesses are we? Or put another way, if everyone were the kind of Christian I am, what kind of church would there be and what kind of witness would that church be giving to the world?

Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, stands ready again today to forgive us for what is, at times, the smallness of our faith, and, in that, to empower us in that faith through Word and Sacrament once again today – to empower us to grow in faith, to empower us to live by faith, to empower us to witness to this faith in our world.

May God bless us all to that end today and may He make us a “hero of faith” to someone else this coming week for Jesus’ sake. Amen.