

Church of the Crossroads
Twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost
World Communion Sunday
October 7, 2007
Neal MacPherson

WHAT IS FAITH?

Habbakuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4

Hebrews 11:1–3

Luke 17:5–6

This morning, it being World Communion Sunday, our thoughts and prayers are with Christian communities throughout the world and especially communities that are undergoing great suffering as they do their best to be faithful. We think especially of Christian communities in Palestine and Iraq, and so many other parts of the world, and not only Christian communities but communities such as the Buddhist monasteries of Myanmar, communities living in the midst of war and oppression, violence and poverty.

The witness of these communities is remarkable. They do not give up on faith or hope. They continue to endure in the face of great suffering and uncertainty. They are our teachers. They teach us about faith.

It is not only these communities who teach us about faith. In our own beloved community, we ourselves are surrounded by teachers, by men and women who live out their faith each and every day. I think of those among us who live with life-threatening illnesses. They do more than survive. There is unmistakable buoyancy in their lives. This buoyancy is not to be confused with any kind of *naïvité*. They are fully cognizant of their condition. They are Christian realists. And yet they live their lives as fully as they can. They endure. This is also true with those who suffer loss in their lives. They too endure. I am reminded of Mary Oliver's poem *Percy (Four)* to be found in her recent book *Thirst*. You need to know that the poem was written in the days after the death of the poet's beloved partner of forty years.

*I went to church.
I walked on the beach
and played with Percy.*

I answered the phone

*and paid the bills.
I did the laundry.*

*I spoke her name
a hundred times.*

*I knelt in the dark
and said some holy words.*

*I went downstairs,
I watered the flowers,
I fed Percy.*

The poem reveals an incredible endurance that comes from faith.

And so we are surrounded by human beings and whole communities who teach us what it means to be faithful. In the first place, they teach us what faith is *not*. And that's a good place to begin. For if we can say what faith is not, perhaps we can then say what faith is.

First, from our teachers in faith we learn that faith is not assent to doctrines about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and so on. This is not to say that faith has nothing to do with belief. It does, but faith is not the same as saying "yes" to the Nicene or some other creed. The communities that come to mind today and those who teach us about faith may have differing beliefs, but they are all faithful in their own way.

Second, we can say that faith is not accepting what the church or someone else says is true if it does not ring true in our own experience. It doesn't matter much what the Pope says, or what Neal MacPherson says, or what Walter Brueggemann says, or what our friends say, or even what our teachers in faith teach us if it does not ring true in our lives. There is therefore a personal dimension when it comes to faith. It has to be my faith.

At the same time, and this is a third point, faith is not something we can possess as we would possess an automobile. When the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, they were perhaps thinking of faith as a thing to be possessed, and the more of it the better! In saying to the disciples that faith as small as a mustard seed is sufficient, Jesus is urging his disciples to put what faith they have into action. The faith they have will be sufficient to

their need. We do not possess faith—faith takes hold of us. The question is not whether we have enough; the task is to put what faith we have into action. It is a gift rather than something we can possess. It is not a gift we can keep, however, as we would a possession. It is something we continually need to receive from the hands of a gracious God, and then to expend, day by day.

Fourth, faith is not to be equated with a vague spirituality defined as a “positive outlook on life.” Faith is not an emotion or a readiness to “believe.” It is not positive thinking. In so much spirituality these days, it doesn’t matter much what one believes, or even what kind of behavior one’s belief leads to, as long as one looks upon the world positively. This kind of vague spirituality is not the same as faith.

Fifth, faith is not sight, as Douglas Hall reminds us over and over again. The Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb 11:1). And the Apostle Paul remarks that “we walk by faith, not by sight.” (2 Cor 5:7) If we see what we long for, then there is no need for faith. There is something incomplete about faith. Faith looks to a future fulfillment of the promises of God, or, as Julian of Norwich said, a time when “all will be well and all will be well and all manner of things will be well.” An English mystic, she said this as she experienced the dreadful plague of the fourteenth century. Whenever I hear Julian of Norwich’s testimony of faith, I cannot help but remember our beloved friend Phyllis Roe. Phyllis said that as she experienced the sudden death of her husband Michael, Julian of Norwich’s words came to her. “All will be well and all will be well.” That is faith. It has nothing to do with sight.

Having said what faith is not, let us now attempt to say what faith *is*. What do the communities we have in mind today and the faithful human beings who surround us teach us about faith. Most essentially, they teach us that faith is trust. In the Judeo-Christian context, it is trust in God. As such, faith is a category of relationship. God has become present to us in such a way that we have faith in God. We trust God. That trust is not once and for all. It has to be renewed daily. And it involves risk, simply because in trusting God we are going beyond sight; we are going beyond what we can really know of God. If we knew God completely, we would have no reason to have faith in God.

In a sense, this is also true with our human relationships. I trust my wife, or my partner or my child, or my friend not because I know him or her completely (how can I know any other human being completely?) but because I have come to believe that he or she has become present to me in such a way that I can place my trust in him or her. This relationship of trust, however, is never a relationship of which I can be absolutely certain. I cannot be absolutely sure about God, or my wife, my child, or my friend. Thank goodness, for to be absolutely sure of them would be presumptuous on my part, and that kind of presumption leads to taking my relationship with them for granted. The decision to trust has to be made again and again.

Can we not imagine how struggling Christian communities in Palestine and Iraq must decide to trust God each and every day? Can we not imagine a person facing death doing the same? And can we not imagine how they must at times entertain doubt? Faith must be renewed day by day. It can never be a sure thing.

If it becomes a sure thing, it is not faith. Take the prophet Habbakuk at the close of the seventh century B.C.E. in the time just before the Babylonian Empire overruns Judah and destroys Jerusalem. He surely has doubts, and he has questions.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
 And you will not listen?
 Or cry to you "Violence!"
 and you will not save?
 Why do you make me see wrongdoing
 and look at trouble?
 Destruction and violence are before me;
 strife and contention arise.

—Hab 1:1–3

The answer is then given.

Write the vision,
 make it plain on tablets,
 so that a runner may read it.
 For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
 it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
 If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
 it will surely come, it will not delay.

Look at the proud
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith. —Hab 2:2–4

In such a time as ours, Christian communities who must struggle for faith and hope can appreciate Habbakuk. Those who are undergoing great suffering in trial in their own lives can also surely relate to Habbakuk's questioning of God. And so can we if take the risk of paying attention to the world around us. We too can speak our complaint. Why cannot life be the life we long for?

The minute we do speak our complaint, however, we know that faith is the only stance we can assume. There is no room for certainty or “no doubt” or some vague spirituality, or pride. There is room only for faith, for trust in God, for a steadfast hope that one day all will be well. May God grant us the gift of faith, and not as a possession but as something we hold tentatively, not as something we can keep in reserve but as something we must act upon, today, and again tomorrow and the morrow after. Only with that kind of faith will we find the grace to endure, to “keep on keeping on,” just as those communities of faith we have in mind today “keep on keeping on,” just as our teachers in faith “keep on keeping on.” So may it also be for us.

Acknowledgement:

I am indebted to the comments from those participating in the Lectionary Study Group and also an article, “Faith: Response in Relationship,” by Douglas John Hall, written in 2005 for The Living Pulpit, Inc.

