

Faith in Naples
August 11, 2013
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 (The Message)

Scripture:
Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd. By faith, we see the world called into existence by God's word, what we see created by what we don't see.

By an act of faith, Abraham said yes to God's call to travel to an unknown place that would become his home. When he left he had no idea where he was going. By an act of faith he lived in the country promised him, lived as a stranger camping in tents. Isaac and Jacob did the same, living under the same promise. Abraham did it by keeping his eye on an unseen city with real, eternal foundations - the City designed and built by God. By faith, barren Sarah was able to become pregnant, old woman as she was at the time, because she believed the One who made a promise would do what he said. That's how it happened that from one man's dead and shriveled loins there are now people numbering into the millions. Each one of these people of faith died not yet having in hand what was promised, but still believing. How did they do it? They saw it way off in the distance, waved their greeting, and accepted the fact that they were transients in this world. People who live this way make it plain that they are looking for their true home. If they were homesick for the old country, they could have gone back any time they wanted. But they were after a far better country than that - heaven country. You can see why God is so proud of them, and has a City waiting for them.

Let us pray . . . God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, remind us that you call us to live by faith. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

I have a confession to make: I am a neat freak. In my world, everything has a place, and everything lives in the place I have assigned to it. While I consider this to be among my best attributes, others are more likely to label it a challenging quirk. Whatever you may call it, it ensures that I can easily find anything I want, and never need to worry about clutter.

I have a second confession to make: as improbable as it sounds, I lost something recently. When I reached down to pick up my glasses from their assigned spot, I came up empty handed. Somehow my perfect system failed me. As a result, I journeyed through a week of life without glasses - until I purchased a new pair.

Since I can't see as well as I once did at a distance, I squinted often and experienced considerable frustration. I had to learn to trust that what I knew should be at a given place would be there. Over and over again, I was forced to consider what it means to live by faith rather than by sight.

While I am in no hurry to repeat my week of limited visual acuity; I am thankful for the opportunity it offered me to revisit a few things I have taken for granted, and to reaffirm some of the many roles faith plays in my life.

When it comes to religion, faith is one of those terms we often use, but rarely consider in detail.

We can try to define it, but must be careful to acknowledge that no single definition is complete.

We can seek to intellectually understand it, but must recognize that as an academic exercise faith remains incomplete.

Faith is necessarily a lived experience.

With this in mind, I invite you to struggle with me as we consider three aspects of that which we call faith.

What is faith? FAITH IS ACTION ORIENTED. Stated differently, faith is more about deeds and less about creeds.

Many years ago John and Brenda Fitzgerald put their faith into action by establishing a way for religious communities to provide new undergarments for children as they started a new school year.¹ Today, thanks to their initiative and Catholic Charities' leadership, we are celebrating Collier County's 17th Undy Sunday².

This year's effort includes 45 area churches and synagogues reflecting considerable theological diversity, yet sharing a common goal. Because people of faith continue to set aside their theological differences, and focus on helping school children a total of more than 650,000 undergarments have been collected and distributed over the years.

Undy Sunday is just one example of something significant that happens all the time in our community: collaborative faith-based projects. I am thankful that our congregation participates in many of these efforts under the capable direction of our Mission Board.

"Faith in Naples" is more than a catchy umbrella term for these projects; it is our part of a larger initiative. Last summer our denomination, the United Church of Christ, launched the "Faith In" campaign to help congregations become more intentional about faith-based community engagement.³ This effort asks congregations to think about their city including its many faith-based organizations, then create a unique "Faith In" campaign featuring the name of the city.

We have "Faith in Naples," and clearly many of you are among the architects of these endeavors. If your faith is calling you to do something new or expand an existing community program, then I urge you to consider making that dream a reality.

Whether or not you are a dreamer, I trust that you are a person of faith.

¹ Bob Reddy. "2013 Catholic Charities Galas Raise Money for Needy." <<http://dioceseofvenice.org/2013-catholic-charities-galas-raise-money-for-needy/>>

² "2013 Undy Sunday Dates Announced." <<http://www.catholiccharitiescc.org/undy-sunday-2013-dates-announced/>>

³ Jeff Woodward. "Faith In Campaign Revs Up in Cleveland, Sets Sights on National Community Involvement." <<http://www.ucc.org/news/faith-in-campaign-revs-up.html>>

A second key attribute of faith is its view of time. FAITH IS FUTURE DIRECTED.

When I graduated from seminary, my first call was as an associate pastor of the oldest Protestant congregation in the city of Dallas. Like many historic mainline congregations, membership numbers had declined dramatically. When I arrived most parts of the sprawling campus were rarely used.

That congregation embraced me, and responded to the youthful idealism and considerable enthusiasm that I, along with a handful of younger adults, generated. Over time, we shifted our focus from those who were a part of our faith community to those who had no such ties but lived just outside our doors. This became one of the most remarkable projects I have ever led: launching a worship experience for the un-churched and formerly churched.

Over a period of several months we did considerable research, then stepped out of our comfort zone to personally invite more than 10,000 of our closest neighbors to help us create something unlike anything we had previously imagined. It was a faith enhancing experience that pushed all who participated to think about a very different future.

There are so many people who feel compelled to apply a future directed faith to help address the biggest global issues of our day. A few years ago, Eugene and Winhee Cho felt led to start a charity focused on eliminating extreme global poverty. Known as One Day's Wages, their nonprofit encourages prospective donors to get involved by calculating then donating a single day's wages to a charity of their choosing that is committed to alleviating extreme global poverty. It offers a practical way for people of all income levels to learn more about this troubling issue, and make a real difference.⁴

I have sought to establish that faith is ACTION ORIENTED and FUTURE DIRECTED. Now let me differentiate it from other desirable personal attributes.

⁴ One Day's Wages. "Founders Story" <<http://www.onedayswages.org/about/founders-story>>

FAITH MATTERS, It matters in ways that nothing else can. In the words of our Scripture reading, faith is a "firm foundation;" it is capable of handling the most demanding "so what" questions life offers.

Not long after I moved to Naples, I started a blog: "So What Faith." Over the last several years I have asked thousands of "so what" questions seeking to connect faith with current local, national and global events. I certainly don't have all of the answers, but am continually reassured about the power of faith as I ponder the questions and read the thoughtful remarks shared by others.

When it comes to a faith that matters, relevance to all areas of life is essential. Toward that end, Paul Raushenbush - senior religion editor for the Huffington Post - recently suggested that Christianity is becoming "cool" again.⁵ For him, this means that Christianity is returning to its role as a "powerful, prophetic voice to the major issues of our day." Among the recent news stories that show a faith that matters, he includes:

- Pope Francis regularly speaking up for the marginalized, and against economic injustice;
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu indicating he would rather go to hell than a homophobic heaven;
- Patriarch Bartholomew's extensive ongoing environmental work;
- Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church Katharine Jefferts Schori's ongoing leadership in discussions surrounding science and religion; and
- the United Church of Christ voting to divest from fossil fuel companies.

Whether or not you find Christianity to be cool, I hope it is or becomes a faith that resonates with you. I invite you to join me in following the way of Jesus, and seeking to live out your faith one day at a time. As you do so, may the words of this morning's Scripture reading come to life:

The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living (Hebrews 11:1A).⁶ Amen.

⁵ Paul Raushenbush. "How Christianity Became Cool Again." <http://day1.org/5166-paul_raushenbush_how_christianity_became_cool_again>

⁶Eugene H. Peterson. *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. (NavPress, 2002), <<http://www.biblestudytools.com/>>.