

Noteworthy Examples of Faith

Hebrews 11:1-16, Proper 14-C, August 7, 2016

Well here we are now three days into the 2016 Summer Olympics—with the eyes of the whole world focused once again on those athletic contests being held in Rio de Janeiro. Of course, one of the most electrifying moments of that opening ceremony—on Friday—was when that final runner, in that long relay of runners that took turns carrying the torch, finally lit that magnificent cauldron that will remain lighted until it is extinguished in the closing ceremony!

You know – that symbolism reminded me once again of the challenge that the LORD God Almighty always sets before us as his people—to keep the LIGHT OF CHRIST burning all throughout our lives. And that’s why one of my favorite chapters of the Bible has always been this eleventh chapter of Hebrews!

In the hope of inspiring those faith-wavering disciples of Jesus Christ, who had become Christ’s followers but were now being pressure perhaps by many people, including parents and grandparents from reverting back to their former way of life in Judaism—the writer here shares with us some noteworthy examples of faith; people who allowed their faith in God to empower them to follow the LORD God Almighty unconditionally all throughout their lives!

But before we begin to take a closer look at some of their lives, I want to bring to your attention—two different definitions of faith that are given to us in our epistle lesson today! The first definition of faith comes to us in verse one: *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen!”* And the second definition comes to us in sixth verse: *“Faith is the belief that God exists and that he also rewards those who seek him!”*

After giving us those two important definitions of faith, the writer then proceeds to share with us some of the great litmus tests we might even use on ourselves in examining our faith!

Litmus test number one is that a person still believes that this world, the universe and everything in it—were and are created by God! So the writer here focuses our attention to the opening chapters of the Bible found in Genesis, chapters one and two. Since that’s where the story of faith begins, in God’s creation of this world, the universe and everything in it—that’s where this writer initially directs our attention too! Do we indeed believe that this world, the universe, and everything in it are without a doubt the products of divine creation?

The writer contends: *“By faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (Hebrews 11:1-3)!*

If we do believe it, we believe it only as the result of divine revelation. God has revealed this great truth to us in his divinely-inspired Word.

Unfortunately some people get so focused on the “science” of creation that they fail to see the purpose of creation. God created this world so that you and I would have just the right place to live. In much the same way as a young couple, preparing for the birth of their first child, puts so much thought, time and effort into creating that wonderfully furnished, beautifully-decorated nursery in anticipation of the birth of their child—so God our Heavenly Father created this world and the whole universe surrounding it too, not only to reveal his glory, but also to provide us with just the perfect “Habitat for Humanity!”

And isn’t it really mind-blowing when you take time to consider all of the profound precision that the LORD God Almighty has built into this universe to make life, all forms of life, possible for us here on earth?

Why the sun, some 93 million miles away is placed at just the precise distance from the earth to make all forms of life on this great big blue marble of ours—possible. And the moon is just the right distance from the earth—to keep the earth at its proper speed of rotation? How could this world and universe ever come into being by accident?

When the writer says: *“The universe was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible”*—he is reminding us that the universe was creation “ex nihilo,” a Latin phrase theologians use to teach us that everything we can see was made out of nothing! God alone is a CREATOR in the truest sense! As a man of faith I still agree in 2016 with the psalmist who confesses: *“Only the fool says in his heart there is no God” (Psalm 14:1)!*

The second litmus test for faith offered to us here—might very well be our desire to honor God with “first fruits” giving in our lives!

Why would I say this? Because the writer goes on to tell us next: *“By faith Abel offered God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain did, through which he was also commended as righteous; God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, Cain still speaks to us though he died!”*

Why did the LORD God find Abel’s offering acceptable but was displeased with Cain’s offering? Though there has been a lot of speculation generated in response to this question all throughout the history of Judaism and the Church, the Bible doesn’t really tell us for sure.

Some believe it was because Abel, who Genesis 4:3 tells us was *“A keeper of sheep” (Genesis 4:3)* offered to the LORD God a blood sacrifice; while Cain, the Bible also tells us: *“Brought an offering of the fruit of the ground” (Genesis 4:3).*

Some people have conjectured this since the salvation of our souls would one day require the Holy Son of God to shed his innocent blood for us on the cross! But others have offered another possible answer. Cain’s offering was rejected because he was guilty of the sin of “tokenism!” Rather than Cain giving God the first-fruits of his harvest—he gave to God—the kind of fruit and vegetables that were a mere sample of his harvest instead; maybe even some bruised fruit and vegetables that is some pretty bad shape! While Abel offered the best that he had, Cain offered only a sampling of what he had! Perhaps it was Cain’s faulty attitude that led to his offering being rejected.

You know it takes faith, real faith, to genuinely honor the LORD with “first fruits” giving in our lives. What if the first debit offered out of paychecks was always devoted to the proper practice of Biblical stewardship in our lives? Do you believe that this would lessen the constant pull of the world on our lives—that yells out to us: Make this purchase and consume this product! Certainly the Bible teaches us that it is only at the cross that this world to lose its powerful influence over us in our lives (Galatians 6:14)!

Then intermittently the writer tells us in verse 5: *“By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him! Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to him but believe he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Vv. 4-6).*

And let’s not forget Noah! In verse 7 we read: *“By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith!”* It took Noah 120 years to build that ark—but build it by the grace of God he did, no matter how much heckling and persecution he received.

All of these men mentioned thus far were put into a right relationship with God—not because of their obedience to the call of their lives, but only because of their faith that the LORD God Almighty himself had given to them as a gift of his grace. So the Old Testament lesson also tells us today: *“Abraham believed the LORD and it was accounted to him as righteousness!” (Genesis 15:6)*

Abraham’s faith empowered him always to look into the future and several examples of his faith are mentioned here. To begin with, he left his homeland solely because God promised to lead him somewhere else. Abraham left, even though he really had no idea as to where he was really going!

Abraham's faith empowered to believe that the LORD God really was going to provide to him and Sarah their very own child!

Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah 90 when she gave birth to Isaac. I have always found verse 12 to be somewhat humorous: *"Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand on the seashore"* (Hebrews 11:11-12)!

The third litmus test for faith may also be a person's firm personal belief in the reality of heaven and the sure and certain hope of eternal life; a life with God in eternal bliss beyond the grave! What Abraham desired, above all, is that which the writer calls here: *"A better country; that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city"* (Hebrews 11:16)! *"These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had the opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city"* (Hebrews 11:13-16)!

I like that story about a man who was out for a walk in his community on a beautiful Saturday morning. Not too far from where he lived there was a baseball field that anyone could use, including those adult softball leagues that usually played their games there on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. But that baseball field was strictly reserved for LITTLE LEAGUE on Saturdays. As the man taking his walk was passing by that baseball field he called out to one of the boys in the dugout: "Hey, young fella, what's the score!"

One boy with a very positive-spirit, it seemed, called back to the man: "We're behind and the score is 18 to 0!"

"Well," the man called back to those boys in the dugout, "You all must be very discouraged!"

That's when the young fella again, who must have been a bright-eyed optimist for sure called back to the man a second time: "Why should we be discouraged? It's only the top of the first inning and we haven't even been up to bat yet!"

Brothers and sisters I am sure that there must be times in every believer's life when they can look back on their past lives and give thanks to God for the powerful way that their faith in him has so admirably served them.

And isn't it that kind of faith that our Risen Savior is promoting among us even as his followers today?

"Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom! Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with treasures in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys!"

Here's a true story—and one that was not concocted to prove a point. On August the 4th 1989 there was a jet airliner that left Washington DC with the destination of Columbia, South Carolina. As they were flying over Myrtle Beach, however, the pilot of that particular jet, owned and operated by what was then "Piedmont Airlines," later purchased by "U.S. Air;" the pilot discovered the landing gear was stuck and that meant trouble. He turned the plane and headed for Greensboro, North Carolina, site of the primary maintenance facility for Piedmont Airlines, where mechanics on the ground could give him the instructions by radio and make a visual observation of the plane that flew overhead.

Following their advice, the pilot was trying to unjam the landing gear, the pilot put the plane through every acceptable procedure now to shake down the landing gear; a roller coaster of a ride and nose dives that day, rocking the plane back and forth, and even a stomach-churning free fall. Meanwhile

the passengers made preparations for a crash landing with their heads down on pillows at their knees. Finally, in a spray of sparks and flames, the pilot cradled the craft to a safe landing a few hundred yards from the maintenance hangar.

One of the passengers aboard Piedmont Flight 1489 that day was a noted psychologist who was scheduled not only to attend, but to also be a guest speaker that day at a mental health conference that was being hosted at the University of South Carolina.

In an interview later that night, he said that this was his first time flying. During the tumbles, turns, and pitches of the plane, that even though he had always claimed to be an atheist that he prayed! "This experience," he said "might just be the catalyst I needed to make me change my ways!"

How do you like that? Brought face-to-face with life's frailty, this man who had never ever even thought about God or believed in the Lord, suddenly found himself doing his best to pray! In that predicament who wouldn't be?

We would all like to live with a greater sense of personal security in this very uncertain world, because we are reminded so readily, so often, especially these days just how fragile human life really is.

Even though God was simply testing Abraham's faith when he told that great patriarch to take Isaac, his only son Isaac whom he loved, to the top of Mount Moriah and to sacrifice him as an offering to the Lord there, that which God did not ultimately require of Abraham, he required of himself in the gift of his Son unto death on a cross for the salvation of humankind. John says, "*He died not only for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world*" (1 John 2:2)!

"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11)! Amen