

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

We heard in today's reading from Hebrews: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Many of the words Christianity uses are little words, little words packed with big meanings, words like God, Christ, love, sin, and the word for today: faith.

Words like faith often have a "churchy" sound to them; maybe they even sound boring or irrelevant. But in reality, they are rich words that point to vital realities. While even everyday words can have a spiritual dimension, just as the ordinary events of our lives can speak to us of holy things, a word like "faith" points to the realm of mystery and depth that lies beyond our ordinary experience.

There are many things in life that are difficult to describe in words: the power of music or art, falling in love, the death of a friend. But, even things that are really beyond words can still be talked about. The words we use might not thoroughly explain the subject, but they help us to get a handle on it, to look at it from various angles in the hope that we might gain a little understanding.

So, does the line, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" make us think, "Huh?"

Notice that even the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wasn't very clear on exactly what faith is. He throws out that one-liner and then treats us to a recital of actions by the faithful men and women of old. If we were to look up these stories in the Old

Testament, we would notice that there is almost no reference to faith as a moving force in the lives of the characters. It may be implied, but it is rarely there for us in black and white.

The author of Hebrews uses the word “faith” in a variety of ways. Sometimes it will indicate trust or belief, and sometimes it will refer to the quality of loyalty or faithfulness. One thing is clear: as used here, faith cannot be separated from hope. The lives of our ancestors are important to the author because those men and women lived lives of faith. The brief sketches we read and hear, are to be read and heard as God’s testimonies about their lives.

When we think about having faith, we often think about puzzling questions. Do we believe there is a God? Do we believe that God is the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of creation, of humanity, of us? Do we believe this or that about the Bible or the teachings of the Church throughout the ages? Faith, as used by the author of Hebrews, is much more than belief that there is a God. Rather, it is trust that God rewards those who seek God. Faith has a long memory and profits from the experience of those who have gone before us. Faith also hopes, looking beyond the here and now, to God’s future and our part in it. Faith is enduring, able to accept the conviction that even death does not cancel out God’s promises. Faith is indeed the conviction of things not seen, a conviction firmly held, but it is more: it is the very being of things hoped for. Faith is not the permanent state of once and for all, but is often fragile and elusive.

God entrusts us with a holy freedom; people of faith always have the option of returning to “the land that they had left behind.” We know that land; it is the one we always view with the rose-colored glasses, the one that the Israelites in the

wilderness longed for, the land with the leeks and the garlic, forgetting they were slaves in that land.

Our God, is a God who is always calling us into new life, into the future. Faith is future-oriented, trusting that God will keep His promises. In a nutshell, faith and hope are one, and the life of faith is a journey. As an example, Hebrews reminds us of Abraham and Sarah and focuses on Abraham's response of obedience; Abraham sets off for the place God has promised, not knowing where it might be. Even when he gets there, the place is not his to claim. Indeed, he and his children and his children's children live temporarily as foreigners in the land of promise.

Abraham anticipated a city with sure foundations even though he spent his life living in a tent, a city with a river flowing through it, even though he lived in a desert.

The God who calls us into new life, gives us a vision of the homeland we seek. Such vision, enabled Abraham to remain faithful to the unseen God who called him. Such vision enabled him to live as a resident alien in the new land, and to see with fresh eyes the goals, values, and relationships of the society encountered in the new land. The faith of Abraham and Sarah was more than right thinking; it also involved right acting. It involved not just their minds, but their whole beings.

Here is another way of thinking about faith. Maybe we have made pancakes, or muffins, or anything that involves a batter containing yeast or baking powder? The batter doesn't look like much, does it? Before they are baked, yeast breads give us a hint at what's to come after their time in the oven. But it's the quick breads that really surprise us. There they sit, batter in a bowl. We old-timers know what to expect, so the miracle is often wasted on us, but make waffles with a young child, and we will be reminded of the miracle of a hot waffle iron, or a hot

grill and a little patience. Batter goes in, wait until the steaming stops, and **wow!** Breakfast! Slathered with butter and anointed with maple syrup, it becomes a feast!

So, the next time we are trying to wrap our mind around faith, or worrying that we don't have enough, or that we don't have any at all, just think about making waffles, and trust that what comes out of the waffle iron will look and taste better than what went in. Remember that faith is more of a process than a possession, it is more on-again-off-again than once and for all. Faith is not being sure where we're going, but going anyway. Faith is a journey through unfamiliar territory, a trip on the water through fog, or a berry picking or hunting trip in the country through the mist, without the benefit of maps, a compass, or GPS."

AMEN.