

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

07 August 2022

First Christian Church

Rev. Dr. Topher Endress

Big Picture: To live out a Christian ethic in the world, we have to become accustomed to a different pattern of life than what the world often offers. This means reconsidering what the world says about some of things we have accepted at face value - maybe what we're learning isn't as in line with our theology as we expect or hope! In particular, our sense of 'faith' and 'responsive call' - two sides to the same coin - are often taught in very worldly terms, with the 'haves' valued way beyond the 'have nots.'

Responding Faithfully

Last week, I shared a message on what I take to be the foundation of Christian ethics, namely that we root everything we are, all our identities, all our relationships, all our actions, in the person of Christ. This challenges us to give ourselves, and our world over to God to be redeemed and restored, rather than ignoring, refusing, or invalidating the world around us. This is what teaches us right and wrong, and how to be ethical Christians. Knowing God well enough to see what in ourselves and in the world is pointing back to God, and what isn't. With that knowledge, we can let go of identities like, 'liar' or 'hypocrite,' in favor of identities like, 'beloved.' To know you are loved by God, and to know God, is to allow yourself to route every one of your actions through that faith, providing the basis for a morally right journey. There it is, Christian ethics in a single paragraph!

This week, my goal is no less ambitious. This week, I'd like to talk about how we respond to God's calling in our life, and what role faith plays in that. Simple, right?

Again, this stems from the big question which I posed last week - how do we *be* ethical as Christians? What are we called to? How do we decide which actions we can, and should, take, and which actions should we avoid? What do I do?

Today, my ultimate contention will be that we need to learn, or perhaps re-learn, a new grammar for our lives. Like how language has both rules and flexibility in order to give sense to the words we say, faith, too, has a grammar. It has rules, and flexibility. Because it tells us about *order*, it tells us about *meaning*. The way we order our lives *exposes* what we think of as our meaning, but also *creates* meaning, too. That means we can't just rely on the Bible as some sort of dictionary, as if we could live rightly by following the specific ethical commands we can dig out. Ultimately, the way the Bible shapes Christian action is not adequately described by cataloging the moral teachings of Scripture.

But that's my final point. I have a bit to go through before that will make much sense for our actual lives. And, as luck would have it, our Scripture in Hebrews actually helps us put this into real-life terms quite well.

First, a tiny bit of context - Hebrews has traditionally be attributed to Paul, especially back at the time when to be considered a valid Christian text the author had to be known and considered trustworthy. But the text doesn't actually say that Paul wrote this. Our earliest documents show the name is actually blotted out, a wildly strange thing to do if the author was someone socially acceptable, but perhaps more reasonable if the

author was a prominent woman within the early church, like perhaps the early church-founder and theologian Priscilla, mentioned in Acts, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Timothy. Perhaps that's why the early church conveniently 'forgot' who wrote this book, given that a book by a woman wouldn't be accepted by most of the ancient world.

But that's a complete aside. I just wanted to note that Priscilla is a great example of a faithful leader, and it is possible that she has a connection to this text.

And that, in fact, is much of what this text is. It is a call to be faithful, to trust in things which are not seen, but to act and thereby leave a mark on the world. Priscilla didn't see the risen Christ, but trusted and eventually helped spread Christianity, starting a church when doing so was punishable by death, aiding Paul on his journey, teaching Apollos, and potentially even writing something that is now in our Bible.

Would she have known these outcomes in the midst of her work? Of course not. But she trusted the call, and responded.

Likewise, Abraham was called by God to leave his family, leave the family business, leave his community and the place he knew, and journey. God didn't even tell Abraham where to go, he just had to trust that God would tell him when it was time to stop! He trusted the call and responded.

Sarah was called to bear a child at the slightly uncommon age of 90. How this was going to happen, no one knew. When? Unclear. Why her and not another wife, which Abraham did in fact have? Unanswered. But she trusted the call, and responded.

What each of these accounts shares is the simple ethical command that we are offered today - to trust that God is calling us to something and to respond. But the manner of their calling, and the diverse ways the promises given to them were brought forth, show something much deeper about what means to be called.

If calling were just a simple command, it would be much more straightforward. It could be in the 10 commandments, even. 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not be greedy, and when God audibly speaks to you go do wherever you hear.' But of course, the simple answer isn't always the most accurate.

When Abraham was called, he was given a series of promises - to father a great nation, to have descendants as numerous as the stars, to be a blessing. But what does Hebrews tell us? That Abraham followed this call, that he left and found the place where God directed him, and did indeed live there. But he lived there as a stranger. He was not a great nation. He had 7 sons, yes, but only one of which would produce the real line - his son Isaac. Plus, I think we can see more than 7 stars in the sky, even without the James Webb telescope. He lived in tents, migratory, not established, still waiting for the promise to be delivered when he died.

Sarah, on the other hand, received her promise. She was given her child. Straightforward, even if the call wasn't.

So was Sarah more faithful than Abraham? Was she better at listening to God, so she got more of her promise fulfilled?

Reading this chapter of Hebrews, it can be tempting to start thinking in these terms. Here is a list of people who are noteworthy for being faithful!

Here's Noah, who built a massive ark without any indication that it was actually going to rain.

Here's Abraham, who traveled across parts unknown to a place equally unknown, to establish a family and a nation without any real sense of how or why.

Here's Sarah, giving birth at 90, despite a lack of painkillers and medical interventions.

Here are Moses's parents, hiding their son despite risking the death of their whole household.

Here's Moses, turning down all the riches of Pharaoh's palace to live as a shepherd in the desert.

Here are the more recent martyrs, who suffered mockings, chains, imprisonment, being stoned, being sawn in two and put to death with the sword, all refusing to yield on account of their great faith.

Even today, people are tortured or killed for their faith. In some countries or areas, Christians are oppressed, and in other areas people of other faiths or ethnic groups are subject to these persecutions. These are real people, people we would name as part of the same Body of Christ that we share, who are jailed, tortured, or killed for professing what we've already professed openly this morning. How on earth can we, the good folks of First Christian Church, possibly live up to the same faith that these heroes and icons have?

Here is the beauty of Hebrews. Rather than compare ourselves to this list, as if we can compare people's faith lives like we compare bank accounts or bench press personal bests, rather than being crushed by the knowledge that others are out here doing far more than we are, that others have been more responsive or are more faithful, rather than this comparison game we are being actively invited into a totally different grammar of faith.

The world might tell us that comparison is natural, even good. Trying to understand what faith means in today's world too often disorders it. This isn't to say that the world is always wrong or bad. Remember, last week I explicitly said that was not the case! But if we want to understand the nature of faith, if we are going to understand Hebrews and this impressive list of folks, we cannot view it with the sense of competition or individualism that we are inundated with daily. This only makes sense when it is governed by the meaning-making rules of Christianity, when faith isn't some internal trait we can measure against each other, but when it is instead viewed rightly as participation in the bigger story that God has been, is, and will continue to be writing.

Scripture is the grammar of our moral lives as Christians, which means that though there are rules, true Christian ethics involves conversing with God. Theologian Brian Brock calls this, "singing the ethos of God," - being molded into a people of demonstrative praise in our daily interactions by virtue of our relationship with the living and present God.

Faith is not just the hope of things unseen. That doesn't name the theological depth that this text offers to us. If faith is just hope, we can hope for anything. I can hope to win the lottery, or to write a bestselling book, or to have a better relationship with a family member. And sure, maybe some hope is ok, or even good. But it isn't a theological faith.

Faith, in the Christian sense, is participating in the calls and responses which reverberate through the Body of Christ from Genesis to now. Faith is expecting the promises given to be fulfilled both now and in the future, anticipating that we may see God at work in our lives but trusting that God is at work far beyond us.

We don't measure faith by how much of the promise we receive, and we certainly don't measure it against each other. It isn't "this person is more faithful than that person," or "I'm not as faithful as this other person is." Faith knits us together with the whole Body. The author of Hebrews, whomever she may be, invites us in to share in the same faith as these folks that we put in children's books and make movies about.

When we come to church, we share a call and response near the start of every service. We did so today. And this isn't because we want to keep you on your toes, or because we want to see people get tongue-tied trying to say 'forebearers' in sync. It's because faith is carried by communities, from before us, through us, and after us. Every time we show up, we are faithful. Every time we pray, we are faithful. Every time we confess God is real, we are faithful. Even every time we push back on easy narratives, easy answers, and instead bring our rage or uncertainty or doubt to God, we are faithful. Check the Psalms, they are filled with questions, anger, fear, doubt, raw and deep emotion that isn't flowery, pastel, and easy. If we can give thanks for the faith of others, rather than compare them to ourselves, we are being faithful.

This requires us to lay down any perspective which tells us to be the best. To measure ourselves at every turn. To compare. Faith is not measured on a chart. Faith is a journey we share together with all our siblings in Christ. The faith of Abraham and Sarah and Priscilla is mine and yours, even if the call and response looks different.

Jesus offers a bit of insight on faith, as you might expect. In the Gospel of Matthew, He reminds us that faith can start small, but makes a big impact. Mustard plants and bushes can grow quite large - the American version getting up to 6 feet tall and the African version towering up to 20 feet. In worldly terms, you can compare them just like that - what's the

biggest and tallest and most important? Which plant gives out the most seeds for medicine and spices? There are easy ways to tell which plant is best in those terms. But Jesus reminds us that faith isn't like that, it isn't some quantitative number that tells us who is the best. Rather, faith is like the tiny seed, which can grow into something unbelievable and unexpected, like a massive tree that gives shelter for birds and changes the whole landscape. Faith is like the tiny yeast in bread dough, and once it is kneaded in it fundamentally changes the entire loaf.

So what do we do when God calls us? Do we compare our call to the heroes of Hebrews 11? Or the persecuted today? Or the preachers with the biggest social media followings, or the best selling books?

No.

We listen to God's call and we respond by being fundamentally changed into a people who can recognize God's work in all that we do. We make a shift from doing the best we can for God to singing God's praises through our whole lives. We have to learn a new language, a new grammar, to make sense of this call. No matter what God is asking of you, we can be certain it isn't a call to win, to dominate, to be victorious. It is a call to be tiny, but connected. To be small and seemingly insignificant, but fundamentally changed. To shift from a language of worldly success to a language of love, sung in praise at the God who calls to us.

May we be attuned to God, called to let our whole lives be a song that is pleasing to God's ears. Amen