

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
Rev. Michael S. Plank  
Hudson Falls, NY

“By Faith”

Text: *Hebrews 11:15-16: “If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”*

Scripture Lesson: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Proposition: I propose to experientially show that faith has the power to change a person’s life forever to the end that hearers will be encouraged to strengthen and keep their faith.

Prayer for Illumination: God of the generations, you have been faithful to us since the beginning. Be faithful still, we pray, and open our hearts and minds to hear your Word this morning. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Scriptural Context: The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were facing persecution, to encourage them not to lose hope. Listen for God’s Word here.

Because I’m a pastor, and because of the work that I do with the gym in Fort Edward, I am exposed to a *lot* of motivational thinking. Quotes and books and videos and experiences are all around me. Some of them I seek out myself, some of them are recommended to me, some are just shared in passing. And a popular kind of thought that exists is this thing you’ve maybe heard of called The Law of Attraction. It kind of overlaps with things like affirmations and vision boards.

And I think that stuff can actually be pretty powerful, but what happens a lot is that I run into people who I think misunderstand the idea. And so I talk to people who will spend *days* making elaborate vision boards: they have giant posterboards covered with glamorous photographs of big houses or nice cars or happy families or fit people; or words and phrases that make them feel good about themselves, but then they complain that nothing has changed. And when we kind of talk through what they're doing, it comes out that they made the vision board and then just kind of called it good and sat back to wait for success to roll in.

The same thing happens with prayer. People pray and pray and pray for something they want and it never comes. And then it turns out that they're not really doing anything besides praying to put that dream into action. All of that kind of stuff is sort of in the ballpark of faith, and it gets called faith a lot. But that is not what the author of Hebrews is talking about.

Faith is not vision boards. Faith is not praying a lot. Faith is not coming to church. "Faith," the author says, "is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (11:1). That's the first verse of chapter 11. The next 39 verses are about person after person after person who, the author says, exhibit amazing faith. But one thing they all have in common is that they *do* things with that faith. There are reasons that's important beyond the theological.

The author of this book of the Bible was writing to Jewish Christians who were under persecution. (Remember, that in the early days, there were people who followed Jesus who were ethnically Jewish, and people who were not). And so to this particular group, it was helpful and effective to call upon the centuries of tradition that the Jews valued; to name the names and retell the stories that they held dear. And so the stories that are listed, the stories of faithful people, are stories of action.

It's Abel offering a sacrifice, Noah building an Ark, Abraham going to a strange land, Sarah conceiving a child, Isaac blessing Jacob and Esau, Jacob blessing his sons, Joseph predicting the Exodus, Moses' parents hiding him, Moses leading the people through the Red Sea, Rahab protecting the spies. It's Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets conquering kingdoms, administering justice, shutting the mouths of lions, quenching flames, escaping the sword, routing foreign armies, and on and on and on. And the practical reason for these stories of action is that action is the antidote to fear. And a people oppressed is a people who are afraid. When you are afraid, the first thing you can do to break out of that fear is to act. To do *something*, to do *anything* to move forward.

But of course there's another rhetorical and theological reason to recall all the old stories: and that is because they are stories of heroes and heroines overcoming impossible odds. And not just any heroes and heroines, but the ancestors of the people reading that letter for the first

time. Which means that that kind of heroic survival is in their blood. And so when this group of oppressed people were suffering and afraid, the writer wrote to them and said “Have faith. *Do* something. Just like all those who came before you did something and survived.”

It’s inspiring to be sure. But it doesn’t always seem practical. How does faith work after all? *How* can you be sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see? That’s something that people have tried to explain for centuries; millenia, even. And so the Law of Attraction is an answer to that question. The Law of Attraction is the idea in so-called New Thought philosophy that what you focus on is what you experience. If you focus on negative things, you will have negative experiences in life. If you focus on positive things, you will have positive experiences in life.

The idea of Manifesting is an answer to that question. Manifesting is the practice of imagining and focusing on not just a result that you hope to experience, but how it would actually feel to get that result; who you would tell, what their face would look like, how you would celebrate, where you would go. It’s painting every detail in your mind of what it would be to experience something that you dream of, and doing that every day.

Vision boards are an answer to that question. Affirmations are an answer to that question. Seminars and podcasts and videos and books and quote cards are all an answer to that question. An author named Emily

Fletcher says that we don't get what we want, we get what we think we deserve, and so the practice is to figure out how to increase our deserving-power.

I don't have a firm answer for you about the mechanics of how best to be sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see. But I do know that if you are not, that if you are racked with doubt, it can be toxic. I am *not* saying that doubt is sinful or that it's bad or that you're wrong if you find yourself in doubt. There is noble humility in recognizing that you might not have all the answers and that you might be wrong. But if you doubt yourself at every turn, if you think you're not good enough or not smart enough or not worthy enough, I do know that 9 times out of 10, the world will conspire to confirm that in you. I do know that if you go through life believing that you're a nail, you're going to find a lot of hammers pretty eager to beat you down.

I know also that if you go through life guided by questions like "What can I learn from this?" "How is God using this experience to teach me?" "Where will I see God's provision in this?" "How will this make me stronger?" If you go through life like that, I know that you will be resilient and will find joy.

And I also know that if you are the kind of person who goes through life feeling like you're a nail and are beaten down at every turn, making the shift to a person who believes that in every experience God is offering a

lesson and a chance to grow, can be an extremely difficult, frightening, and painful shift to make. *But* I know further that it is possible. That it is free. And that it is completely and totally within your power at any moment. Even and including this moment here. It is possible to change the course of your life forever. It is possible to find and strengthen your *faith* – to manufacture a sureness of what you hope for and a certainty of what you do not see.

I don't know if it's best for you to use a vision board or to manifest or to write affirmations or to pray or to come to church or to read the Bible, but I know that whatever tool is best for you will have something to do with looking forward instead of backward. The Author of this letter to the Hebrews talks of all these amazing heroes and heroines and says "If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (vv. 15-16).

The windshield of your car is *way* bigger than the rearview mirror. And that's because it's a lot more important to see what's ahead of you than what's behind you. Faith – that thing where you are *sure* of what you hope for and *certain* of what you do not see, is about looking forward to something better and fixing your eyes on that thing. And then *moving forward*. Stepping out on the journey. And *going*. And when you do, you can change your life. When you do, you can change the world. Countless

people have done it before you who were no different, no more special, no more brave, no more loved, no more worthy than you.

By faith, Gandhi used a non-violent revolution to lead India to independence from British Rule. By faith, Martin Luther King used love to change the course of race relations in the United States forever. By faith, Nelson Mandela endured 18 years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement, much of it being restricted to one letter and one visit every six months, and emerged to become the first president of South Africa.

By faith, your mom made it out of an abusive relationship to raise you in safety and happiness. By faith, you left a terrible job and opened your own business. By faith, you were the first person in your family to get a college degree. By faith, you broke the cycles of family dysfunction and your kids are happy and healthy. By faith, you moved to a new city and built a new life. By faith, you can become a co-creator with God of the life you were meant to live. By faith, you can become a co-creator of the Kingdom. By faith, you can move mountains. **Amen.**