

“Responding When Reality Seems to Eclipse God’s Plan”

A sermon in the series

“*Summer Memories: Scripture Verses Worth Remembering*”

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- Matthew 5:43-48 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your friends, hate your enemies.’ But now I tell you: love your enemies....”
- Hebrews 10:36-11:1 Memorization Verse-- To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Faith leads us to active responses in obedience to God’s plan.

Today’s “scripture verse worth remembering” is about trusting what we cannot see. The unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews begins chapter 11 by explaining the power of faith this way: “To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see.” It’s a good representative verse to memorize from the book of Hebrews because “Hebrews speaks of faith more than any other book in the New Testament.”¹

Having faith is, at the same time, both easy and difficult.

On the one hand, coming to have faith is a relatively simple step. You don’t have to attain special knowledge or possess certain resources or accomplish particular tasks in order to believe. To have faith all you really need to do is choose to accept that something *is* or that something *will be*.

But on the other hand, it can be difficult to have faith because what we want to believe may not correspond with what our senses and our common sense tell us is reality.

Still, faith is why we’re here. Consider: because of their trusting faith in God, our predecessors established this congregation and constructed this building. Before that, because of their trusting faith in God, Scottish pilgrims brought the Presbyterian system of Protestant church organization from the British Isles to this continent. Before that, because of their trusting faith in God, brave, committed missionaries traveled throughout the Mediterranean and Europe and Africa and Asia and the Western Hemisphere over hundreds of years to share the gospel message of God’s love revealed in the Son Jesus, our Master and Savior. Missionaries have been sent out from this country, and in recent decades Christian missionaries have come here from other countries.

For none of them was there a promise of success. They had no guarantee that the effort they expended would result in fruitfulness or security. But they did what they did in faith. They acted in response to God moving their hearts. They sensed God calling them. They acted in faith because they were *sure* of what God called them to hope for; they were *certain* of inevitable accomplishments they could not yet see.

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, Westminster Bible Companion: Hebrews and James. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, 63.

To have faith is to live as though what you long for in the future is already the case. So for instance, both individually and as a church, we resolve not to idolize the past or simply coast through our present. Faith empowers us to face the unknown future with courage and expectant hope. We push forward as individuals and as a church because of our faith in God which Jesus models for us. By faith we are reassured that we are always within God's love. Because of our faith in God we are strengthened to seek God's will for the world—remember those words, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? Faith gives us direction and courage for the way we talk with others. Faith empowers and guides actions we take to move the world closer to God's will, God's design.

Sometimes faith is seen merely as a set of beliefs, a passive reality like when we talk about "the Christian Faith." But faith is not passive. Faith is dynamic. Faith has life. Faith is an active response of obedience. A New Testament scholar has written that faith "is that characteristic of the Christian life that enables one both to persevere even in the midst of difficult circumstances and to step out into the unknown with courage and live in a risky and vigorous way."²

I believe that's the situation we Christians in this country face today. **Faith leads us to an active response in obedience to God's plan.** When we strive to "be sure of the things we hope for" we may need "to persevere even in the midst of difficult circumstances." When we strive to be certain of the things we cannot see we may need "to step out into the unknown with courage," even to engage our culture in ways that might be perceived as "risky and vigorous."

An example: imagine, for instance, a woman and man standing side by side, performing the same work. How can anyone justify paying them different wages? Though the situation has improved in recent decades, the reality is that pay disparity still happens. By faith we are sure that the hoped-for end of pay disparity will come to pass as an expression of economic justice. Yet we don't simply *wish* it to happen; we persevere in efforts to achieve equality even when opposed by a reluctance to change or by antiquated views of the values of males and females. We persevere because to have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for.

Yes, faith leads us to active responses in obedience to God's plan—that "on earth as it is in heaven" goal. So, for another example, that's why Christians are generous and hospitable in showing special concern for vulnerable persons:

- We advocate and provide care for children neglected or abused by people who may lack constructive parenting skills or may have mental illness.
- We advocate and care for the addict whose sense of self and autonomy and judgment is under the control of a chemical takeover of her brain.
- We advocate and care for refugees fleeing war-torn regions for places of safety.
- We advocate for individuals and families working to establish a new, safer, more secure life for themselves and their families in this country.

The reality is that our world continues to produce victims of abuse and addiction and aggression. But by faith we live sure that our hope for an end of abuse and addiction will be fulfilled. By faith we know that though *we* may not see the results of our efforts to help and to heal, we are certain that we are living into God's plan for health and safety and wholeness.

I'll say it again: faith leads us to active responses in obedience to God's plan. As followers of Jesus we have faith in the inherent worth and equality of all persons. Consequently our faith moves us to actively respond when words or actions seek to demean or harm

² Frances Taylor Gench, Westminster Bible Companion: Hebrews and James. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, 63.

individuals or entire classes of people because of a characteristic like their country of origin or skin color, their gender identity or religious beliefs.

We saw angry, fearful, belligerent white supremacists in my home state of Virginia last week. Of course, people with such misguided, discredited, evil-provoking viewpoints are found not just in Charlottesville but throughout society. It was sickening and disheartening and infuriating to see and hear their hateful ideology – an ideology, let’s remember, that during World War II our nation and many others opposed with vehemence and nobility and unity of purpose and tremendous sacrifice.

When we hear such hateful words, see such hate-inciting assemblies, feel the pain of fellow human beings targeted by such vile, dehumanizing demonstrations, how are we to respond? Physiologically and emotionally, our bodies may urge us to stand up and fight back. But how does our faith call us to respond to such hatred? Though it goes against human instinct and expectation, our faith calls us to offer a different response.

Those seeking to stir up hatred don’t need our hate; they need our love. That’s what Jesus said. We heard his words from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus advised, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your friends, hate your enemies.’ But now I tell you: love your enemies....”³

We have faith that our love – love that is inspired by Jesus, love that is modeled by Jesus, love that is fed by Jesus – we have faith that our love can overcome hate. God assures us that the enduring, embracing, encompassing power of love will, in time, snuff out the hate that burns and erodes the hearts of white supremacists, neo-Nazis and others who seek to divide and hurt rather than unite and heal. Love will overcome the hate fueled by fear of diversity and difference and inclusion. As Martin Luther King, Jr. declared, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”⁴

We have faith that we can be sure of the things we hope for on earth as in heaven. We have faith that we can be certain of the triumph of God’s will for the world even if we do not see at present. Yet again I’ll say, when we strive to “be sure of the things we hope for” we may need “to persevere even in the midst of difficult circumstances.” When we strive to be certain of the things we cannot see we may need “to step out into the unknown with courage,” even to engage our culture in ways that might be perceived as “risky and vigorous,” such as:

- Praying for hard hearts to be opened to love and acceptance;
- Learning more about the history and the issues of racial justice, such as through next Sunday evening’s “Bridges” program here at the church;
- Speaking up in peaceful, gracious disagreement when people you’re with make insensitive, hurtful, divisive views about social justice;
- Publicly showing our commitment by joining with others at a prayer vigil or public assembly.

The Christian faith is not a monolithic collection of theological tenets or dusty religious practices. Our faith leads us to active responses in obedience to God’s plan.

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³ Matthew 5:43-44a Good News Translation

⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Strength To Love,” 1963, at <https://www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/mlkquotes.htm>, accessed 8/16/2017