

“Remembering Our Past”

First in the Series *Keeping the Faith*

Hebrews 11 (read with congregational participation)

Somehow my sermon title got left out of the bulletin. Somewhere between worship planning and final printing – the title got deleted. It is true that this is the first sermon in a three part series called *Keeping the Faith*...but *Keeping the Faith* is the title of the series, not this sermon.

Keeping the Faith is also the title of one of my all-time favorite movies...and not just because it's got Ed Norton and Ben Stiller in it. It's one of my favorite movies because it's got Ed Norton and Ben Stiller in it – and they play a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi. It sounds like the set up for a great joke – “a priest walks into a bar” – which, no joke, is actually the first scene in the movie – a clergy collared Ed Norton is in a bar drinking himself into confession before a congregation of one – a kind, but confused bartender, who finds himself listening to a Catholic priest talk about a woman and how she broke his heart. Aren't celibate priests supposed to be over this ‘love thing?’ Well...apparently not. Which is what I love about this movie. *Keeping the Faith* is about a faith that is lived out as a complex and passionate journey – not a cut and dry, predictable plan.

Best friends from boyhood, this self proclaimed “God Squad,” are two young hot-shot religious leaders that

both walk into New York City congregations that are suffocating from faiths that have collected more dust than they have cultivated more devotion. As this priest and this rabbi lead families of *different* faiths – their own faiths are *similarly* challenged by the complexities of life...namely that they are both in love with the same woman - a beautiful, smart, no-nonsense, cell-phone carrying, successful business woman, Anna Reilly. (*Now if I were Hollywood, I would have cast Anna Reilly as a beautiful, smart, no nonsense, red-heel wearing, successful Baptist preacher. I mean wouldn't that round things out nicely? A priest, a rabbi, and a Baptist??*)

Anyway - Anna Reilly just happens to be the same “Anna Banana” tomboy that palled around with this priest and this rabbi when they were just kids – when these “religious professionals” were just “regular people.” The childhood Three Musketeers – now all grown up - find themselves confronted with powerful feelings of love that ultimately really affect their lives of faith. Their past gets tangled up in their present and just in case you haven't seen the movie...I won't spoil how they work out their futures. Let's just say – it's complicated. After all - priests are celibate and aren't supposed to fall madly in love with anyone other than God. And rabbis...well, rabbis are supposed to

marry nice Jewish women from their Temple...which Anna is not.

The long and short of it is, this movie, *Keeping the Faith*, follows friends as they live their lives – trying to be faithful to their God and to their feelings...all the while not messing up the friendship that defined their past. And for all three of them – having faith in an unknown future is par for the course. One scene captures this perfectly: Ed Norton is talking to his mentor in the faith – an older priest and says, *“I keep thinking about what you said in seminary, that the life of a priest is hard and if you can see yourself being happy doing anything else you should do that.”*

To which the retired priest replies, *“That was my recruitment pitch, which is not bad when you're starting out because it makes you feel like a marine. The truth is you can never tell yourself there is only one thing you could be. If you are a priest or if you marry a woman it's the same challenge. You cannot make a real commitment unless you accept that it's a choice that you keep making again and again and again.”*

This is the essence of faith – it's a commitment. And not one that always comes easily. Faith is a choice that at some point in our life we make for ourselves, albeit almost always with the overwhelming help and influence of other faith-filled mentors and friends. And then because that choice is one about faith and not just

choosing the flavor of the day – it is more than a fleeting choice - it is a forever commitment. And we have to continue to make it over and over and over again. Because life provides ample opportunities for us to be tempted to make a new decision – one that's against faith. A choice that decides that these wavering doubts must mean this 'faith' thing “really isn't working” or “isn't worth it.” I mean – life is not all peaches 'n cream. *Hypothetically*, we could easily choose on any given day not to have faith. But *in reality*, the commitment to have faith in God – is a relational covenant not a one-sided choice. And God's fidelity is unwavering even when ours isn't.

It's often said that if we could see our faith unfolding into the future, by definition, it wouldn't be faith. The writer of this letter we just read together says, *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,”* (Hebrews 11:1). If that's what faith *is*, then why do we want to have anything to do with it? Who wants to make a commitment to the unknown? Well - all the verses in Hebrews 11 that follow that first verse tell us why we want to have faith. Because they tell us what faith *does*...that is, *what faith has done* for all of these people who's stories are past to us – but as they were being written were definitely in the present for them.

Look at the scriptures again with me – and notice all the action verbs...and

notice how the prepositional phrase “by faith” precedes each one as a backdrop or even a springboard by which the verb is initiated into action:

By faith Abel offered
By faith Noah respected
By faith Abraham stayed, received, offered
By faith Isaac invoked
By faith Jacob blessed
By faith Joseph made and gave
By faith Moses was hidden (which, by the way, is just another way of saying: By faith Miriam hid Moses)
By faith Moses refused, chose, left, and persevered
By faith the walls of Jericho fell
By faith Rahab received in peace
...and the list goes on...listing the prophets and the martyrs of early Christendom...

...and each of you could continue the list I know - naming those in your life who *by faith* made it through hard times and good times, who’s love and devotion to their faith inspires, instructs, and encourages you...even to this day: a grandparent, a teacher, a pastor, etc...

Faith may be a noun – but it is only relevant when it becomes the initiator of action. The tricky thing is – with the way faith works – we don’t always know what that action is or what it will be. When we choose to live *by faith* – we’re choosing to do whatever that faith leads us to do. And often – that means doing things we otherwise wouldn’t feel comfortable doing – either because they don’t make sense, they are too difficult, or maybe just because they never would have occurred to us in the first place.

Living *by faith* introduces us to a God that loves to work in the world in and through the lives of you and me. In fact God became human – in the incarnation of Jesus – to show us how to live and work in the world. And don’t you know Jesus took life day by day, and by faith, for he never knew what would happen next. And that’s so true for us as well - when God is working in our lives – there’s no telling what the day holds, let alone the future!

This is certainly true for Elizabeth Gilbert in her popular book turned movie, *EAT PRAY LOVE*. Gilbert writes:

The search for God is a reversal...in the search for God, you revert from what attracts you and swim toward that which is difficult. You abandon your comforting and familiar habits with the hope (the mere hope!) that something greater will be offered you in return for what you’ve given up. Every religion in the world operates on the same common understanding of what it means to be a good disciple – get up early and pray to your God, hone your virtues, be a good neighbor, respect yourself and others, master your cravings. We all agree that it would be easier to sleep in, and many of us do, but for millennia there have been others who choose instead to get up before the sun and wash their faces and go to their prayers. And then fiercely try to hold on to their devotional convictions throughout the lunacy of another day.¹

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews knew something about the power of

¹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *EAT PRAY LOVE* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 175.

reminding the early Christians that their ancestors walked by faith despite often quite mystifying circumstances and despite the myriad of struggles they faced in the lunacy of their days. Just when these Christians need a word of encouragement the most – they receive it in this letter – by taking a trip down memory lane and recalling how people in their past “kept the faith,” so to speak.

The writer points to the life experiences of the patriarchs (and matriarchs too) as examples of what it means to live *with faith* and *by faith* and *through faith* and *for faith*. Take note though – no one in this list of exemplars of faith lived his or her life as an example to anyone; their having done so would have disqualified them as good examples. It is because they lived out of their own faith without an eye for an audience that they are examples to us.² And if we are to be a people of faith, we must share that integrity of intention...looking to the past to help us live in the present, not to find *recognition* in the future, but rather to find the life of faith that most reflects the love of God.

Sometimes reflecting the love of Christ in our lives of faith is easier than at other times. “Hebrews 11 offers two portraits of faith,” says pastoral theologian and preacher, Fred Craddock:

² Fred B. Craddock, “The Letter to the Hebrews: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. XII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 145.

One image is filled with triumph and victory over enemies, with dramatic deliverances from all threats and dangers, even death; the other is marked by torture, public mocking, imprisonment, beatings, stonings, homelessness, destitution, hiding in caves, and violent death. Popular names for the two conditions are ‘triumph’ and ‘tragedy,’ ‘success’ and ‘failure;’ and yet both are descriptions of the life of trust in God. The one group would likely draw new adherents to faith in order to share in its remarkable benefits; the other would likely evoke mocking and jeers, ‘Where is your God? Why does your God not come to rescue you?’ ...

Hebrews simply entitles both portraits “faith.” Faith does not calculate results and so believe, nor can an observer look at one’s lot in life and thereby measure the depth of one’s faith. The writer is simply reporting on what has always been true among God’s believers, and the reasons for the differences are hidden in the purposes of God. To offer both examples to the readers is in the service not only of truth but also of encouragement. The readers have suffered a great deal. To offer them only examples of suffering faith could add to their discouragement; to offer only examples of victorious faith could produce feelings of guilt and self-doubt. But both [portraits] are presented, and the readers must locate themselves among them.³

When we look to the past to remember the faith of our fathers and mothers, it is tempting to find in our story something different enough from their story so as to “provide a disclaimer” on why it was easier for them to have “faith” back then: things were simpler...times were different...faith is all they had...they

³ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

didn't know any better...that was what 'worked' for them, etc...

But we can't do that. We must locate ourselves in their stories. We remember our past, and the past of our ancestors, not simply to recall the stories of another people and place. Their stories inform our own. We *remember our past*, and the past of our ancestors, to gain glimpses of *what's possible for us in the present...and for what might be ahead in the future* if we choose to "keep the faith" now. The life of faith is complex and is all about following the passion of Christ, and not just the passions of our hearts. Often – those two things are one in the same. But many times, they're not. Sacrifice is a given if and when we live *by faith*. Many times we have to re-commit to the life of faith in order to realize the longevity of God's everlasting love and faithfulness.

Hear again the words of Scripture, "*All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them...therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,*" (Hebrews 11:13, 12:1).

The Southern short-story writer, Flannery O'Connor, wisely helps her characters discover, "*The meaning of redemption is precisely that we do not*

have to be our history." This is true. But Scripture helps us discover that while we don't have *to be* our history, remembering our past and how our ancestors lived *by faith* is evidence of God's faithfulness from generation to generation...and that helps us live *by faith* today.

That's my sermon title by the way, *Remembering Our Past*. Stay tuned for how you can also "keep the faith" by *Living in the Present* and by *Trusting in the Future*. For this week though...**will you live by faith?**

Time will tell.

Amen.