

3 PENNIES AND A LOT OF FAITH

Our text this morning is taken from Hebrews 11, the biblical Hall of Fame of heroes of the faith; reading first verse 1.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen

Then verses 8-10 tell of one of the heroes of faith, Abraham, who had enough faith to “set out, not knowing where he was going” (Imagine that!)

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; **and he set out, not knowing where he was going**. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For **he looked forward** to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

In his book *Self Esteem*, Robert Schuller tells the story of when Mother Teresa appeared before her superiors with her dream for building an orphanage.

Her superiors asked, “What resources do you have Mother Teresa”?

I have three pennies.

But Mother Teresa, you can't build an orphanage with three pennies.

I know that, Mother Teresa said, but with three pennies and God, I can build an orphanage.

Imagine with me that one of her superiors had an MBA from Harvard

At this point in the conversation he might say: “Mother Teresa, I need to see your business plan.” Three pennies is not an adequate business plan.

But, Mother Teresa might respond, “I didn't say I just had three pennies. I said I had three pennies and God.”

But, the Harvard MBA responds, I just don't know how to enter “God” onto my excel spreadsheet.

Indeed!

I hope you are struck with the audacity of Mother Teresa's bold dream, the apparent stupidity, the apparent foolishness of it all.

Through the eyes of faith, she could see that orphanage. God had granted her the gift of faith; the gift of “a conviction of things not seen.”

There is oftentimes a fine line between faith and foolishness. **When you look backwards in time**, you can tell on which side of that fine line a hero of faith has walked. Mother Teresa did get her orphanage. So, her dream was a bold venture of faith. It wasn't foolishness (hindsight is 20/20).

But my radical suggestion this morning is that **at the moment of decision, when you are looking forward in time, not backward**, there is no way to know whether what you believe God has called you to do is a bold venture of faith or is just plain foolishness.

When you look at it that way, the exercise of faith as a “conviction of things not seen” is a scary thing.

Consider with me again the story of that hero of faith, Abraham.

Our Hebrews text tells us that “by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”

The enormity, the apparent foolishness, of him “setting out, not knowing where he was going” is too easily lost on us because Hebrews is looking backwards, telling us that it all worked out; he did receive the inheritance he was promised.

But things look much scarier when one looks forward at what Abraham did. Try to put yourselves in Abraham's shoes at his moment of decision. That moment is recorded in Genesis 12: 1-4.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “**Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.** I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

To bring home the enormity, the apparent foolishness, of Abraham's bold venture of faith, imagine what your reaction would be if your young adult son or daughter announced to you and your spouse one day: “I've packed my bags and I'm leaving.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don't know. I have this conviction that God is calling me to a bold venture of faith on behalf of God's Kingdom. But I don't know where that will be. But I believe that God will show me. So I'm leaving.”

How would you respond? You might call up Bethesda and arrange for some Christian counseling.

I might respond by saying “What do you mean when you say that ‘God will show you where you ought to go?’ That is not a good enough reason for just leaving home. That is just plain foolish.”

The reason it looks foolish is that your son or daughter has been gripped by a “conviction of things not seen” (the very essence of faith).

The point I am trying to make, from the examples of Mother Teresa, Abraham, and the other heroes of faith listed, after the fact, in Hebrews 11, is this: **at the moment of decision, bold ventures faith don’t look very promising. In fact, they may just look stupid because there is absolutely no way of knowing whether your conviction about what God has called you to do will actually come true.**

That is what makes faith a scary thing.

But that doesn’t mean that anything goes. It doesn’t mean that you can justify every possible decision you make by claiming that “God has called you to do it.” There is a deal-breaker.

That deal-breaker is that God never calls anyone to do something that is in clear violation of the other teachings of Scripture.

The history of Christianity is strewn with tragic examples of professing Christians claiming that God has called them to do things that are just plain evil.

In ancient times, the Crusades and the Inquisition come to mind. Getting closer to home, the way in which Reformed Christians persecuted Anabaptist Christians around the time of the Protestant Reformation comes to mind.

In more recent times, the death of 909 professing Christians by cyanide poisoning precipitated by the madness of Jim Jones in northwest Guyana in 1978 was not the result of a bold venture of faith on the part of Jones. It was just plain evil.

The death of 54 adults and 28 children in a tragic fire in the Branch Davidian compound precipitated by the madness of David Koresh in Waco, Texas in 1993 was not a bold venture of faith on the part of Koresh. It was just plain evil.

So, any claim that you make to be embarking on a bold venture of faith must pass the test of not violating other teachings of scripture.

But I dare to suggest this morning that this is the only unyielding qualification on the claim of any Christian that he or she has been called by God to embark on a bold venture of faith on behalf of God’s Kingdom, the final result of which cannot be predicted at the moment of decision

Lest you find that assertion to be too shocking, let me address two other common qualifications that many Christians assert to try to tame this wild and wooly and scary thing called faith. I will suggest that these two apparent qualifications should not be deal-breakers. And I will express these common qualifications by imagining two responses that I could receive if I announced my intention to embark on a bold venture of faith

“Harold, you are simply not up to the task”

There may be some legitimacy to this qualification in extreme cases.

I remember like it was yesterday a coffee break I had with a student at The King’s College about 45 years ago. I asked him what he sensed God was calling him to do after graduation.

He said he felt called to witness to Christ as a major league baseball player.

I was dumbfounded and couldn’t find the right words.

The reason I was dumbfounded was his hand-eye coordination was so poor that he had trouble finding his mouth with his cup of coffee.

A Joe Mauer he would never be – I mention Joe Mauer to give momentary encouragement to any of you who are Minnesota Twins fans. But, remember that fine line between faith and foolishness I mentioned a few minutes ago? Well if you believe that the Twins will do well next season, I know for sure which side of that line you are walking on. Believe me!

But, I digress.

My point is that in this extreme case, I felt comfortable thinking, even if I didn’t exactly say it to this student: “you are simply not up to the task.”

So, there are extreme cases where a Christian may “simply not be up to the task” when thinking about embarking on a bold venture of faith.

But such extreme cases are more than counter-balanced by those many cases reported in scripture where God used people for the fostering of God’s redemptive purposes who, on the surface, were “not up to the task.”

Consider, for example, the response of Moses when God called him to that bold venture of faith to lead the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, as recorded in Exodus 4: 10-12

But Moses said to the Lord, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then the Lord said to him, “Who gives speech to

mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?
Now go, and I will be your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.

Moses was surely not up to the task. But God was. And God simply asked Moses to be a partner.

Or, consider the disciples whom Jesus called to follow him -- A motley crew in the eyes of the world. They were clearly not among the elite of society. They certainly “were not up to the task.” Yet God used their bold ventures of faith to turn the world upside down.

So, if you are contemplating a bold venture of faith, but you feel that you are not up to the task, that is OK. In fact if you felt up to the task, it might mean that your dream of faith is too small.

You see, ultimately it isn't your task after all. It is God's task, and he is simply looking for a partner.

A second apparent qualification that is often used to try to tame that scary thing called faith is

“Harold, if you will just talk to a trusted friend or loved one, you will see how foolish an idea this is.”

There is a kernel of truth in this advice.

If you are contemplating a bold venture of faith, and you are married, at a minimum you should talk to your spouse.

Since we live in an agricultural area, you have probably heard the story of the farmer who was out working in his field and saw the letters PC in the sky.

All excited, he ran inside his house, and told his wife that they needed to pack their bags quickly because he had just been called by God to go to go to the mission field to “preach Christ.” His wife asked, “Harold, are you sure you weren't just called to plant corn?”

The truth of the matter was that a skywriter was just advertising “Pepsi Cola.”

But, seriously, before embarking on what you think is a bold venture of faith it is wise to talk about your idea with some trusted friends and loved ones, especially within your Christian community.

Contrary to the type of “Jesus and me” individualism of the pietist Christian tradition in which I was raised, Christians are not called to be “Lone Rangers.” We are members of the body of Christ in a particular time and place, and we should seek input from trusted Christians with whom we fellowship before packing our bags.

But such input may not be a deal-breaker. I remember with sadness a college student once telling me that she felt called to venture out on faith into an uncertain career as an artist, hoping to be God's salt and light in a profession that sorely needed a Christian witness. But when she talked to her family and friends about this dream of faith, they strongly counseled her against becoming an artist because they didn't see how she could make a decent living as an artist. That is heart-breaking.

So, by all means, it is wise to seek input from trusted friends and loved ones before embarking on what you believe is a bold venture of faith. But, after processing that advice, at the moment of decision, it has to be a decision that you make before God.

So where does that leave us?

My exhortation to each of you this morning is that if God has given you the gift of faith to believe that you have been called to a certain task on behalf of God's Kingdom, and what you believe God has called you to do is not in violation of any biblical teachings, then **just do it** – dare to believe that the dream God has given you will come true, even if you have absolutely no evidence right now that it will come true.

And your venture of faith does not have to be of the earthshaking magnitude of the adventures of Mother Teresa, Abraham or Moses. It could be you deciding to bear witness to your experience of the love of God in a difficult school or work setting. It could be you deciding to become involved in or even starting a new ministry to some of the less fortunate in our community, like some of our new immigrant neighbors. The NWC students who will be going on a Spring Service project in Bluefields, Nicaragua will be embarking on a venture of faith.

Whatever venture of faith you embark on you will not be able to see the end from the beginning. You may not have a good answer, looking forward, to those who tell you that you are not up to the task, or that the task you are embarking on is really foolish. That is the nature of this scary thing called faith. You just need to **step out on faith, seeing through the eyes of faith** a future that you cannot predict, daring to believe, with no hard evidence to support your belief, that God, in partnership with you, will bring about a result that will honor and glorify God's name and advance God's Kingdom on earth.

Just do it.

Benediction: May God Grant to you the gift of faith; the conviction of things not seen.

Amen

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