

Cooperstown, Canton, And Crafton Heights
Hebrews 11, 12:1-2
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
May 6, 2007
Pastor Dave Carver

Can I tell you one of the things that I hate about being a pastor? I've already shared this with some of our nurses, but I'll come clean to you all. I hate the fact that sometimes when I'm visiting you in the hospital, we'll be reading scripture or praying and then someone from the medical establishment will come into the room and say, "All, right, now, Reverend, can you wrap things up, because we have important things to do here..." As if talking to the Creator of the Universe or hearing the word of God are insignificant!

That's the world we live in, though. Our world says that faith is a passive, meek, submissive posture that you take when you are out of more attractive options. You know how that goes...when are you likely to hear the phrase, "Well, um, you've just gotta have faith, right?" When your team is down by fourteen runs, or when Dad has just left, or when the oncologist has said "Yes sir, that's right, It's inoperable." For many of us, "faith" is another word for "shadowy hope that something better might come along, but don't count on it."

But that's not how the faith of scripture is described. Look at the beginning of our reading today – Hebrews 10:29: "but we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls." Isn't that interesting? In our world, many people see faith as holding back, hoping, and not doing anything. In Hebrews, though, we hear that having faith is the opposite of shrinking back. We do NOT shrink back...we have faith...

And then, to prove his point, the preacher in Hebrews leads us through the "Faith Hall Of Fame". We didn't read all of this this morning, but you should. The people who are here are men and women of action. Faith is obviously a verb in the language of the Bible. In Hebrews 11, we read that Abel sacrificed and Enoch pleased and Noah built and Abraham obeyed and traveled and procreated and offered and Jacob and Isaac blessed and Moses left Egypt and kept the Passover and Israel passed through the sea and defeated Jericho and Rahab obeyed...How? By faith. One after another, like the statues in a Hall of Fame, the preacher reminds us of those who have come before us in the family of faith. These are men and women of heroic deeds and great actions.

Have you ever been to a Hall of Fame? The Pro Football Hall of Fame is in Canton, OH. Maybe you've been to Oneonta, NY, to visit the Soccer Hall of Fame, or Novi, Mich to see the Motor Sports Hall of Fame, or Fort Worth, TX to see the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame. Did you know that there's a Celebrity Lingerie Hall of Fame in Hollywood (ain't Google a wonderful thing?)?

Sharon and I went to visit the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY. I saw "Shoeless Joe Jackson's" shoes. I saw the uniform that "Bad Henry"

Aaron wore when he hit home run number 715. I even saw Babe Ruth's bowling ball and shoes. We went to an all-star game and I saw Bob Feller pitch to Harmon Killebrew and Ritchie Ashbourne. And when I left the Baseball Hall of Fame, do you know what I wanted to do more than anything?

My visit to Cooperstown made me want to watch baseball. I left feeling like, "Wow, I'm really not that good. These guys are incredible!"

And it occurs to me that that is the goal of the Hall of Fame – whether it's in Cooperstown, Canton, or St. Louis MO (home of the Bowling Hall of Fame) – the goal of these Halls is to create spectators. All of these museums exist because they want to put fannies in the bleachers. To create a hunger in you and me, the target audience, a desire to consume the entertainment that these folks provide. The Hall of Fame is there to create an audience for the pros.

Listen to me, beloved: as we walk through the Faith Hall of Fame, and as we come to the First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights, our goal is NOT to create spectators. I am NOT HERE to put fannies in the pews/

But last week, Dave, you quoted Hebrews 10 and talked about how we shouldn't give up meeting together, and that we should go looking for people who had given up, and so on. And that's right. We need to do that. But that's not the goal. Putting people in this room is the strategy that we employ in order to reach the goal.

So if the goal is not to create spectators or fill this room, what is the goal? My goal is to make sure that all of you are running the race. That each person who comes into the room is challenged to follow Jesus – that each person who comes into this room is growing all the time to look more and more like Jesus. My goal is to have our lives reflect Jesus' life.

What would it be like if you opened up the Book of Matthew to read about Jesus and this is what you saw: "And lo, as it was the Sabbath, they went unto the synagogue, and behold, Jesus saith the sermon was 'not bad, but a little long.' The synagogue arose and sangeth Psalm 23, and behold, Jesus said, 'Lo, that one always maketh me weep.' And after the worship had ended, being precisely sixty minutes, they partook of the holy coffee hour and donuts."

What would it be like if you opened up the Book of Acts to find out how the early disciples followed Jesus, and you read, "It being a Tuesday, and the First Tuesday of the month, the Apostles all went to a committee meeting, where there was much talking. After the vote being 7 in favor and 5 against, Thomas was elected to keep the minutes of the meeting..."

God forbid that the scriptures would read like that! We'd all die of boredom! We are witnesses to the fact that God revealed his purposes for all of creation in Jesus Christ! We celebrate the fact that the Church demonstrates the love of Christ to the world. That Jesus and his followers were actively engaged in healings, feedings, teachings, challengings, proclaimings...

Wait just a second, Pastor Dave. You're the one who is all over us to come to worship and sit through these meetings. Are you saying that those things are unfaithful? That they are a waste of time?

Yes they are...If those practices do not make us more receptive to the Word of God or the movement of God in history, then they are a colossal waste of time. The only reason to come to this building – ever – is because something that you or I are doing here will help us be better positioned to follow Jesus into the world. The only reason to come here is to get us more excited about playing the game, not watching it. That's why when one of you speaks with me about this room and you refer to the platform upon which I'm standing as a "stage", I correct you and say that this is a "chancel". We don't have stages here in church, where a few folks such as the preacher and the choir perform and the rest of the folks form the audience. We have a chancel whereupon some worshipers stand and lead the other worshipers in the work off worship. There is no performance – it's all worship. Showing up here, whether it's for worship or for meetings, is not the goal. Showing up here is the strategy that teaches and equips us to follow Jesus in the world.

Hebrews Chapter 11 is the "Faith Hall of Fame". One by one, scriptural characters are lifted up and their behavior is noted. When we walk through Hebrews 11, we can see what faith looked like then. What does it look like now? Is faith a meek and sniveling shrinking back? The whimpering wishful thinking of a group of people who don't have anything better to offer? Or does faith have hands and feet here and now?

Here's what faith looks like in Pittsburgh, 2007. It looks like the student who says to her friends, "You know, I need to stay home and read the book so I can write a paper because I have to pass this class in order to get a degree so that I'll be in a position where I can be a blessing to others. So I'm going to have to pass on the movie tonight..." Isn't that right? That for some of us, Acting Faithfully means that we study hard and do the homework – because that's what God is asking us to do right now.

Faith, in Pittsburgh, 2007, can look like a person who chooses to live in the city when the guys at the office are telling him he's crazy to want to "put himself in that situation". Faith can look like a couple who buys a house in a neighborhood that's changing because they want to help it change in the right direction.

Faith is choosing to live on less than you earn because you want to have a chance to give some of that money to the things that matter to God. Faith means saying "yes" to a new ministry and throwing yourself into it even when you're scared to death.

What does faith look like here and now? This may be a crazy example, but I'd like to say that faith looks like Brian Mack scoring a run in Wednesday night's softball game. Early in the game, Brian was on base and the person who

was up after him got a hit. Brian was running all right, but he was also watching the ball. Do you know what happens when you do that? You slow down. You go out of the baselines. You lose track of where you are supposed to be. Later in the game, Brian was on base again and when the batter after him hit it, Brian started running. As fast as he could, he was heading for home. He got to third base, and instead of turning around to look for the ball, he listened to his coach. When the coach said, "Keep going", Brian didn't lose a step. And he scored.

Faith is a lot like that. Once we know where we're supposed to end up, when it's our turn, we put our heads down and we run as fast as we can. And while we run, we listen to the coaches who surround us – the people who will help us make decisions about how to get home. But we keep looking at Jesus. Our eyes are not on the ball, or on the other players, or on the folks in the stands. They are fixed on Jesus.

Beloved, I hope and pray that you are not here this morning to watch what the rest of the folks are doing. My prayer is that you are here to become equipped so that you might be able to act more like Jesus each day. Not because acting like Jesus is going to save you from anything – but because acting like Jesus might just help put your friends and neighbors in a place where they can hear Jesus for themselves. There is nothing more important for you to do that to offer yourself to God and to the world that God loves in this way. God bless you. Amen.