

Faith Is Not Always a Walk in the Park

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August 7, 2016

Reading: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

In the early years of Christianity, faith was not a walk in the park. The book of Hebrews, written in those years, inspired strength in its earliest readers by remembering the faithfulness of generations of spiritual ancestors who dared to trust God's promise; insisted on living a faith that was real, without ever seeing the fulfillment of the promise.

Abraham and Sarah, it reminded them, became parents in their old age...through faith in what must have seemed like an unreasonable promise. That same promise told them that someday they would be able to settle on the land they moved across as nomads. They died before they ever saw that part of the promise fulfilled, as did their children and grandchildren. And yet their trust in a vision of God's future guided their lives, directed their pilgrimage.

Yesterday we paid our final respects to our friend and comrade on that same journey, Malinda Myers. As we remembered Malinda's life, just four years shy of a century of life, we were reminded of her childhood of harsh struggle to survive, recalled parents who were denied the basic right to literacy and education; we were reminded again that faith can still be very real—even when it isn't a walk in the park.

Today as we gather at the communion table I am mindful of the many ways that for much of humankind, life remains a struggle. I had a preaching professor one time who reminded the seminarians in his preaching class of a fact that many preachers miss. "Never underestimate the suffering in your congregation" he told us. Now Bill had a wicked sense of humor: part of him was probably suggesting that having to listen to us talk was a contributory cause of suffering in the congregation of itself. But I don't believe that was all he was saying. He reminded us that life is often hard, and that the brave people around us don't always let on about what hurts, where the pain is. But that doesn't mean it isn't there...in this community of faith—in every community....

What is true for those of us who live in relative comfort is truer still for those who don't. At the moment you all have been getting a glimpse of Brazil, thanks to the

Olympics. Two years ago this month, I came back to you from Brazil, fresh from a visit with Brazilian churches. A couple of the congregations I was privileged to visit happened to be located in favelas. What's a favela? Put bluntly it's a community founded on unusable land by people too poor to be able to own property. If you are watching the Rio Olympics—the favelas are the neighborhoods you are not seeing, the ones just off the polite grids, the ones on the steep hillsides, the places where the police patrol the borders at night, four to a car, assault rifles hanging out the windows. This I have seen with my own eyes: a quiet posh street with military police cars patrolling, lights flashing. Just out of sight, a few feet down the hill, is where the favela begins. And I have been for evening worship in a church in Rio, just down that steep slope, where the pastor gathers with a tiny congregation in a small room.... We walked past those police cars, and literally a hundred steps down steep steps into the favela, down from that same street, to that a tiny sanctuary in a place where there is no safety and little wealth, a church where they sang their hearts out just like you do, and where Faith—the faith of Sarah and Abraham, the faith of the martyrs of the early church, is alive and kicking and joyful and real.

What is this faith thing, that makes ordinary people into heroes, and causes women and men, children and youth to work and pray and fight for a better world for every child of God? What is it that keeps us praying, rather than giving up? What is it that gives us the courage, the endurance, the joy to claim life in a way bigger and better than the evidence seems to justify? What is it that keeps us loving in the midst of pain? What keeps us merciful in the face of every temptation to the contrary? What keeps us speaking up and acting up, when it would be way easier to just sit down?

The writer of the book we call Hebrews evokes a sense of what faith is—some scholars call these words a definition, but it's no definition—it's a poetic evocation, it's a prayerful invocation: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith the ancient ones received their approval. By faith we understand that the ages were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen [now] was made from things [previously] invisible."

As we gather at the communion table today, we come with a reminder from both the New Testament and from our experience that some of the things which are the most real are not the flashiest or the most visible. Sometimes the real action isn't up on the streets where the flashy folk go, but in the hidden sanctuary unseen by the powerful. Sometimes the most real moments, the things which make the biggest difference in history, occur on a hillside on Landon Terrace in Schenectady, rather than the ecclesiastical assemblies. Sometimes, the assurance of our blessing from God takes place not through the official words of blessing by the church, or by the doctor, or by the school authorities. We know it instead in a promise experienced in the touch

of a hand, in the sharing of a hug, in the raising of a hope—certain assurance of grace as yet unseen.

That's what these bits of bread and these tiny sips of grape juice or wine mean—these too are an evocation of faith, they are an invocation of the blessings of God. In the sharing of them we point to a feast still unseen but surely coming—for all of humanity, the poor as much as the rich, the peasant and the landless, the homeowner and the tenant together. These bits of bread, these sips of juice around the table of God—we may not see it yet, but with these actions we share and support one another in the conviction of a reality as yet unseen, but born in the midst of us, long long ago, and more real, more powerful, we insist, than the supposed realities of a prosperity gospel.

Come to the table of our Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, a Palestinian activist and teacher, crucified for daring to speak out and heal, and love, long long ago. The meal he blessed again and again, with tax-collectors and prostitutes, with pre-eminent teachers of the law and with outlaw rebels--it was just visible enough to seem dangerous to those who failed to understand it. And now it is ours to share it, and share it some more, to receive the blessing, to share the abundance, to live into the call.

Come to the table of Jesus, and share some bread, and taste some grace, and let your faith be restored, faith in a City of God still in the making, still in the making all around us, on every hand.