

Sermon For Sunday, August 14, 2016 - "More By Faith ..."

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 14, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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"More By Faith ..."

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

This Sunday our second reading from the book of Hebrews again has a lot to say about faith. Last Sunday the reading from Hebrews provided a good definition of faith: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen."

- Faith is both assurance and conviction.
- Faith provides assurance and comfort in the storms of life.
- Faith is the conviction that, even when things look bleak, God is at work and calls us to join that work, to get out and respond to the storms.

Last Sunday we heard about how Abraham and Sarah lived by faith. They were promised a future with hope and yet they needed to be assured of God's promises again and again. They learned to trust these promises by living with conviction, acting as if they were true. We heard Sarah and Abraham's story told with the repeated refrain, by faith ... By faith they obeyed, by faith they lived in tents, by faith they received a son ...

This week in the Hebrews reading we hear more about faith and those who lived by faith. Hebrews tells of a great cloud of witnesses, faithful people who provide encouragement for us to run our own races with perseverance. What is striking about these people's stories is that they include a mix of triumph and suffering. Some who lived by faith experienced victories: they conquered enemies, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, won strength out of weakness. But others who lived by faith experienced great suffering: public mocking, imprisonment, beating, stoning, homelessness, violence, and death. With this mix we see that our lot in life is not a measure of our faithfulness. Faithful people suffer; faithful people experience triumphs.

A life of faith is just like any life - full of sorrow and joy, pain and healing. What makes a life of faith different is not our circumstances. What makes it different are the promises of God. The promises of God assure us that we are held in God now and forever, that God is always with us, that we have a future with hope no matter our current circumstances. With these promises we can live and act with faith in the present moment. Hebrews offers us this message through extreme examples of people living by faith through triumph and suffering. What Hebrews doesn't include are examples of ordinary people living by faith through more normal ups and downs. We need those stories too.

Last week I shared some general examples from the history and life of this congregation and asked you to share about particular people you know who live by faith. Just about every example I heard was about a Good Shepherd person - something I thought was so fitting because you all are examples of faith to me. I can't name you all, but I want to lift up some of the names and stories I've heard this week and noticed in this past year. As members and guests of Good Shepherd, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and we need to

hear these stories to help us hold on to and act on the promises of God. These folks have given permission to use their names.

By faith, Kathryn Thompson and Sara Hanssen left family and moved to Decorah. Almost a year ago they took a chance and came to Good Shepherd one Sunday morning. Now they are an integral part of this congregation and the Kids Lunch Club initiative that has fed hungry kids this summer. They, and every one of you who has been a guest at some point, took a risk by stepping outside their comfort zone to come to worship here. Thank you; you have so richly blessed this congregation. By faith, you have all made it here today. Whether you trusted that something would feed you or that someone else needed you here, you acted on faith. I trust God will feed you in some way.

By faith, Tanya and Faust Gertz discerned God's call for their family and are following it even though it means leaving their beloved Decorah and their friends and church community. By faith, so many of you have made similar moves to follow God's calls for your lives.

By faith, you also live out the daily grind that comes with all of our calls from God. You choose to respond to a difficult person with kindness, you take time to help your child even though you're tired, you make a nice meal even when your spouse or family could get by with sandwiches again. At times the daily tasks can feel oppressive and overwhelming, but we can approach them with hope and even joy because God is present in them.

By faith, Richard and Millie Dinger, charter members of Good Shepherd who now live at Aase Haugen, have been married for 75 years. By faith, you tend to your own marriages and relationships. By faith, you seek healing and you care for one another when marriages and relationships are broken.

By faith, Jutta Anderson raised her adopted sons Lars and Niels after her first husband died when the children were just 7 and 4, when she was just 38 and had no relatives on this continent. She followed God's calls for her and her family. By faith, so many of you live with hope and trust after the death of a loved one, even as you grieve so deeply.

By faith, Elizabeth and Jimmy are bringing Henry to the waters of baptism today, trusting that God's promises are for him. By faith, you as parents and grandparents have entrusted your children to God and you cling to the promise that they are held in God as they live and when they die, whether they succeed or fail, are close or far away.

By faith, last fall David Lester and Amalia Vagts shared how they are living differently with money. They are seeking to be intentional about what they spend and how much they give away. They figured out the percentage of their income that they give away and set a goal of reaching 10%. By faith so many of you live simply and give freely, trusting in God's abundance and acting on God's call to care for all of God's creation.

By faith, Marion Hanson founded Mary's circle and the Prayer Shawl Ministry which has deepened the prayer life of this congregation.

By faith, Judy Mikkelsen is facing cancer with a sense of peace and trust in God's care for her. By faith, so many of you approach health challenges and other struggles with faith - faith that wrestles, questions, prays, accepts and endures.

By faith, Marilyn Anderson taught English as a second language to the southeast Asian refugees this congregation helped resettle. By faith, this congregation continues to care for immigrants and refugees through the Path to Citizenship program, by supplying housewares for recent refugees in Postville, by learning about our Muslim neighbors.

I could go on and on. All of these people, all of you, have experienced sorrow and joy as you live by faith. Faith is not dependent on the circumstances of life but on the promises of God. God's promise is that we all have a future with hope. That is both reassuring and a call to help others have hope. How is God calling each of us to live by faith in the week ahead? Where is God calling us now as a congregation?

- To join the sacred conversation about race that will be happening in Decorah?
- To get to know Muslim neighbors and neighbors of color so that we can help shape a future with hope for our community and our nation?
- To draw on our history of resettling refugees in order to help refugees in Postville, now?
- To expand the Kids' Lunch Club?
- To deepen our capacity for prayer?
- To invite others to be part of this community?

We can start with the August challenge in the bulletin. Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race set before us. Let's take a moment to give thanks for these witnesses and to pray for our future.

Amen.