

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
August 7, 2016.
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16 & Luke 12:32-40

A professor goes to see an old monk; hungry for spiritual knowledge and enlightenment. The monk welcomes the man and they begin to talk and after some time, tea is brought in. The monk starts pouring the tea and when the cup is full to the brim, he keeps pouring. Tea spills all over the table. He keeps on pouring. The professor cannot bear it and finally says, "Stop! What *are* you doing?" The monk puts down the teapot and looks him in the eye and says, "For half hour you have been regaling me with all your accomplishments: the books you've written, the retreats you've been on, the volunteer work you've done. You say you came here to learn from me, to receive wisdom, yet you're so full of your own knowing. When your cup is already so full, where's the room for what I have to offer?"

It's difficult to receive when we are so concerned about working for our own salvation.

Today's reading from Hebrews talks about an orientation Paul recommends, a focus on their faith – a faith he describes as an "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Their faith is in the promise we heard in the gospel reading – "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Listen to the ways Paul describes this attitude, this faith, this orientation of the people's hearts he suggests we disciples of Christ adopt:

- That we appreciate the order of life by understanding that God is the Creator and we are the created. What is visible is created from the invisible. And so it follows that we might have the right attitude of awe, reverence and gratitude.
- Like Abraham, we are to proceed without "knowing where we are going," - waiting when directed to wait, moving when directed to move. In other words, trusting in Divine direction, not our own ideas of what is the best travel itinerary. Life cannot be planned; by faith we walk, moment by moment, day by day, into an unknown future. But one full of promise.
- Like Abraham, we are to "look forward," regardless of our struggles, our desert times. Paul calls the Christian community to rest in faith and always look forward to "that city that has foundations and whose architect and builder is God." We cooperate with God, we lend our sweat and tears, but the Creation is God's and in faith we look towards what God is creating and pay attention to the signs of that new city emerging.
- In faith Abraham received the "power of procreation," even though he and his wife were well beyond child-

bearing age when Sarah conceived and bore Isaac. When we decide to defy the limitations of our own thinking, and that of our culture, we can be used by God to do marvelous things – even when, and especially when, it seems impossible.

- The people “are seeking a homeland.” They are aware that their home and family are limited to this lifetime and that their ultimate home is elsewhere. For as Luke says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” What we value and where we put our attention is where we end up. This is the life of faith. We move towards what we believe and in doing so, develop the faith that creates what God desires. This what heaven tastes like. This is what “home” feels like.

Doesn't this all sound intriguing? All these ways of being faithful creating the kingdom of God? But if that's where we leave it, as an interesting idea or perspective, we miss the point. A life of faith is a life lived *in and through* faith. It is a practice.

So these are *practical* ideas that Paul offers us when he compares Abraham's faith to the ways we are ourselves are called to live and grow in faith. Practices of letting go, of not pushing our own agenda. Of creating ways to remember that God is the Created and we, the created, are being led in ways that are good and loving;

developing our ability to listen for the Spirit's guidance - a willingness to wait and be patient, a willingness to risk and to act; a nurturing the desire to grow in wisdom through study and silence; and allowing our creativity and passion to manifest as we create with God. It takes our whole life and our whole attention to grow into the people we are meant to be.

The simple practices we need to develop as Christians are key. Regular daily prayer – we need to give God the time and space to give us what God wants us to receive. We have to practice letting go of our preoccupation with “getting things done.” As the Sisters of St. John the Divine say at their Mother House in Toronto – the daily calls to prayer help people let go of their *compulsion to finish*. When the bell rings, it's God's time and you simply put down what you're doing no matter how much you “just want to finish this,” and go into the chapel to pray. It helps us learn that our work is not the most important thing – regular connection with God is.

Another practice is the Examen – this is a commitment to a nightly review of one's day. Looking back on our day we see where we were connected with God, and where we became blind or deaf or simply downright belligerent or self-centred, The point isn't at all to judge oneself – something that keeps many people from doing this practice – but rather to take the time to see where we were open and responsive to God, and where we forgot and forged ahead on our own steam, and how it's all working out for us. Without taking the time to notice, we miss the riches. We miss, as I like to say, how our daily bread arrived, how we were given what we

needed, and as a result, we miss the opportunity to be awed by God's love and allow gratitude to soften and reshape our hearts.

Trust is a practice as well. How often do we say we trust God to provide but end up hoarding and keeping more than we need for ourselves when our brothers and sisters are suffering? Trust requires honesty with ourselves about the ways we justify withholding our time, love, money, energy to do the things that will truly satisfy?

Being ready is important as well. As we hear in today's reading from Luke, God arrives in the most unexpected and unimagined ways. We need to prepare our hearts and minds to be open to receiving our God. This can mean something as simple as not hanging onto old grudges, fears, resentments. It means letting go of the things that keep our hearts closed. It requires some rigorous self honesty so that we don't fool ourselves and put off addressing the difficult things that we each one of us are challenged by.

Like the professor in the story I began with, we have to empty ourselves in order to receive – the gifts of God, the arrival of God in our lives. In fully receiving what is generously offered us, we will be able to freely share from this open, trusting, faithful place.

Listen to this example from a First Nations community in Ontario. In the traditional language of this tribe, the counting system only goes up to 3. Initially outside experts thought this demonstrated how primitive the culture was. But here's another way to understand this –

I want you to imagine I'm giving you a loaf of bread – take it in your left hand, now I'm going to give you another loaf of bread – take it in your right hand, and now I'm going to give you a third loaf of bread.... How can you take it from me? Your hands are full. Three is more than enough. It's time to share what you have with others. There's no need to have four, five or six things. You are hoarding. You are too full. And you can no longer receive.

We can't receive when our hands are full. We can't receive what God wants to give us when we are so busy doing things - organizing, storing, tidying up – doing all the things that occupy our time.

Our hands need to be empty, our cup needs to be empty.

Faith cannot flourish or grow when we are pre-occupied with stuff. We cannot follow Jesus when we are busy 24/7. Our attention is captivated by something other than God; we are putting our treasure up elsewhere. And in pursuing our own goals, we cannot grow in faith. And with our attention on things other than our Creator, we end up withholding what rightly belongs to others. We were created to live in community; to share the gifts of God.

And so this morning let us approach the altar with empty hearts and empty hands so that our God can feed, love and guide us into lives that reflect the tremendous Love that is worthy of our faith.

Amen.