

Faithfulness  
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Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16  
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Sometimes people can do a lot of damage in the name of religion, can't they?

Have you ever gotten some bad theology thrown at you? A friend of mine once did and it devastated her. Connie was a regular at her church and at a variety of small groups. That's where she got the bad theology virus. "Faith," she was taught, "can remove every mountain in your life." So she began applying the mountain-moving faith to every area of her life and with amazing results. Obstacles seemed to dissolve before her. Illnesses seemed to exit her body quickly, she was able to secure better employment, better finances, and better parking places at the grocery store. Connie had strong faith.

That is, until the afternoon when the hemorrhaging began. Then the diagnosis came and it hit her with stunning impact: cancer. The next six months could have been a case study right out of Elizabeth Kübler Ross' book, *On Death and Dying*, in which the author describes the various stages people go through when faced with terminal illness.

First, she denied that she even had cancer. "The doctors are mistaken," she told herself, "I'll get a second opinion."

"This is a bad dream; it'll go away by itself." But the dream came on stronger and loomed more menacing with each day. Connie then became desperate. She went back to her study group for support; they claimed biblical promises for her total recovery, prayed over her and assured her that if she didn't waver in her faith, she would be completely restored. But Connie's precious life was slipping away like water draining through the crevices in cupped hands.

Then came the stage of anger and resentment: "Why, why, would God cut my life short? God, why are you doing this to me?" Her resentment eventually yielded to unhealthy soul searching: Connie now looked upon herself as the problem. "If only I could have mustered more faith; if only the right person had prayed for me. If only I had not wavered in faith; if only I could discover the sin that had opened the door to this attack of Satan. If only . . ." she said.

Now at less than 90 pounds, Connie's shriveled body and intense pain led her to finally accept the inevitable. She finally accepted the fact that she had little time left with friends and family and the things in life that most of us take for granted. During these moments, Connie decided to brush aside the broken pieces of her defective faith and to try and start all over again.

She stopped bargaining with God; stopped blaming herself and began to squeeze every ounce of life from the days she did have remaining. With God's help, and the help of friends, she learned to accept her condition and cope with it. She nourished hope, and hope carved a road back to God. And that is where we leave Connie, for a bit, this morning.

Bad theology makes the rounds. Every once in a while, it caricatures good theology and presses so hard that it leaves no room for reflection or correction. Then the theology congeals and hardens into doctrine. Bad theology says that *faith* is all we need to live victoriously. That with the right *kind* of faith, the right *amount* of faith, and with the right *use* of that faith, every mountain in our life should crumble and blow away. The

extreme version of this bad theology says that with such faith, every sickness, every financial crisis, and every problem will just disappear. This sounds to me like we humans are trying to control God.

Yet, the remarkable part of this bad theology is that it is derived from our epistle lesson! Many of us here this morning would affirm the importance of faith in our Christian pilgrimage. Yet, what do we do when our faith flounders and that mountain stands unflinchingly before us? When all you've ever believed isn't enough? If you've ever struggled with this thing called faith, take another look with me at our lesson for today.

In the early part of Hebrew 11, faith stands tall; it makes a smile break across God's face, because faith pleases God. Faith conquers kingdoms, slams shut the jaws of lions, puts entire armies to flight, and rescues its possessors from firing squads. Reading further in Hebrews 11, faith throws a ticker tape parade and leads a triumphant group of heroes and heroines before God's review stand: with the two words, "By faith"—"by faith, Abel," "by faith Noah," "by faith Abraham," "by faith Sarah." This is the faith we've always admired. The Sylvester Stallone kind of faith in Rocky, where against incredible odds, the nobody kid from Philadelphia believes enough to win against Apollo in the ring.

But have you ever noticed that carefully tucked within the folds of this same chapter is another group of heroes and heroines, and another kind of faith? In fact, these *heroes and heroines* are so opposite to the Abraham and Sarah types, they are all but forgotten by us. Listen for faith among this group faith heroes:

“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill treated—wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.” [11:35-36].

Who are these people? And what's wrong with their faith? What small groups have they been attending? They're laughed at, beaten up, thrown in the dungeon, severed into pieces like some gory horror movie. They don't even have a name! How can these nameless people possibly stand next to Abraham and Sarah? Their faith hasn't worked! Hasn't made them very victorious. Is this some kind of a sick joke? Their prayers for protection and life apparently have gone unheeded.

Yet, remarkably, incredibly, these outcasts are deliberately held up before us as models of faith! Sounds fantastic, but it's true. By faith Noah built the ark; by faith Abraham became the Father of a multitude. By faith Sarah received the power to have a baby when she was pushing 90. By faith some guy got beat up. By faith a woman got laughed out of class. By faith four children were killed in church when a bomb exploded. By faith thousands moved around under the cover of darkness, hiding in caves . . . What is it about these famous and not-so-famous people that make them examples of faith for us? What is the common denominator between Abraham and Sarah and those who have struggled and suffered? What is the writer trying to tell us about faith?

We need to tack seven letters on to the end of faith *f-u-l-n-e-s-s*. God wants faithfulness, not just faith. This may make some sense when we discover who the recipients were who first needed to hear Hebrews 11. We know from internal evidence that a missionary effort had reached their part of the world. Was it Paul? Or maybe Apollos? We just don't know. But the result of the missionary effort is clear: many had made a decision to become a Christian.

Then the missionaries had left town. These new Christians continued meeting every week. And then it happened. The community grew tired of all the hymns coming from their corner down at the end of the block. The neighbors became bold in expressing their distaste for their strange Christian practices. Then a few

members were shunned in public places. Dirty politics grabbed property away from their wealthy members on spurious charges. Finally, several devout Christians had been arrested, some even executed.

So you can understand when some must have said, "Enough is enough," and left the church and Christ, and slipped back into easier religions. So when the evangelist caught wind of this, he wrote back to them and said:

“Don’t throw it all away now. You were sure of yourselves then. It’s still a sure thing! But you need to stick it out, staying with God’s plan . . . we’re not quitters who lost out. Oh no! We’ll stay with it and survive, trusting all the way.”  
(Hebrews 10:35-39-The Message)

Endurance is another word for faithfulness; it means sticking it out, hanging tough all the way to the end. People who endure are so convinced of the outcome of God's promise that nothing will keep them from enduring. Endurance is simply hanging on when your world starts to cave in; hanging tough when mountains don't move, hanging in there even when families or friends seem to come and go more quickly than the changing seasons. Endurance is what Nietzsche meant when he said: "Whatever doesn't kill you, strengthens you." That is, if we can stand strong in the face of problems without running to the nearest exit, our faith will become even stronger.

In watching the Olympic Trials last month and when Alysia Montano fell during her race, I remembered an incident when they were held in Barcelona. Derek Redmond competed in the 400 Meter Semifinals that year. He had spent eight years preparing for this moment. Less than 150 meters from the tape he was maneuvering into position when Derek unexpectedly crumpled to the ground.

A severely pulled hamstring ended his chances of placing in the 400 meters. We saw his face; it was contorted in pain and he was sobbing. Yet incredibly, he got up and hobbled toward the finish line dragging his right leg behind him. Though the race had ended, Derek still hobbled along toward the finish line. The crowd leaped to their feet and began to cheer him on. Then one man jumped from the stands and broke through the security police; it was his father, Jim. The father put his arm around his son and five minutes later the two of them crossed the finish line together. They had not finished first, but they had won.

Few are called to sensational feats of faith; but all of us are called to faith-full-ness. To endurance. To finish the race that is set before us.

Our lesson concludes with two motivations to turn us all into marathon runners. First, we have surrounding us those who have already finished the race—they're all standing at the finish line cheering us on! Abraham, Sarah, Gramma and Grampa, family members. They're all there urging us to endure, to do our best. But One other stands out among all the others. Jesus. "Looking unto Jesus," the writer says, who is the creator and the perfecter of our faith. Christ Jesus urges us on and even supplies all the faithfulness we'll need. We just need to keep our focus.

Faith is a gift and I know it feels elusive for some people. But this I know for sure: Faithfulness often helps us to realize our faith.

So this morning add fullness to your faith and make it faithfulness, the very quality that makes all of us heroes and heroines. And if it is faithfulness, not sensational faith that really counts, then I want to add one more name to our parade of faithful saints: Connie. For she finally discovered that it was not mountain-moving faith but faith-fullness, that carried her to the finish line.

She could endure the pain, rejection, and questions of her situation, because she able to look down the stretch to the God who lives eternally the very source of faithfulness. Connie a died a beautiful death, glowing with love for God and her family and friends. Her faithfulness continues to speak to me and now to you.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you are our source and giver of all good things. Help us to live in faithfulness that strengthen our faith that we may truly abide with you. Amen