

August 16, 2020  
Twenty Second Sunday of Online Worship

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**10/10, Would Highly Recommend**

**Matthew 18: 1-7**

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

*Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.  
1 Timothy 4: 12*



After you've been to a restaurant or a live concert, two things we can't really do right now, one of the first things you might do is...well in this modern age, you post a picture on Instagram or FaceBook in some artsy form. But really, the first thing we tend to do after an amazing experience is to tell someone about it. You want them to die over the amazing Brazilian steakhouse or rock out to Taylor Swift's new album. But today if a youth were to recommend a new TV show or place to visit you may need to invest in a new urban dictionary. For example if they start with the phrase, "here's the tea," be prepared to hear some highly recommended gossip. Or if you hear, "it was sick," it doesn't mean they were disgusted by it but that it was awesome. Or after the Hamilton musical was released, you may have heard, "Hamilton is fire." This doesn't mean there is any scene with fire, it means it's trendy. And if you don't catch on, well they'll probably swipe left on you. But out of all my favorite new terms for 2020 is the combo phrase "10/10, would highly recommend." They are 100% certain that this is the best Rita's flavor out of the millions of other options. You could divide those phrases and just say one or the other, but throw them together and you have without a doubt the best of the best recommended for you.

We're celebrating Youth in the Church and the World today to bring an emphasis on one of the many teachings of Jesus, "You won't enter the kingdom of heaven unless you are like the little children." Jesus believed in "the least of these" people: women, the impoverished, children, orphans, widows, those racially discriminated against, the sick. And he took the experiences of those minorities to teach his disciples how to enter the kingdom of heaven. The one way to enter heaven that Jesus was certain about was to have faith.

Just a few weeks ago I preached about faith and made the claim that faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin. But after diving deeper into our text for today I think I was mistaken, for the writer of Hebrews tells us that the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (Hebrews 11:1). It is anything but certain. Did the Israelites step out into the Red Sea certain that they would feel dry land beneath their toes? Did the Israelite army march around the walls of Jericho certain that the walls

would come tumbling down? Did Rahab, a woman ignored and abused by much of society, welcome Israelite spies into her midst certain that her life would be spared when they left? Perhaps, but not likely...for youth, there is very little that is certain, especially for this coming fall. Knowing school will be taught virtually again brings an array of concerns and hopes that blur the certainty of their future. For seniors, what does this mean for college tours, applications, and scholarships? For juniors what will this year amount to...will I learn enough to be able to get into college in two years? For sophomores, this isn't what they want their high school experience to look like... they have already lost one semester of their 4 years...so what will come next? And for the freshmen, well there won't be a first day of high school walking into the front doors of SPHS, Broadneck, Severn, Spaulding, St. Mary's...there won't be a first homecoming game or dance. All of those firsts will be tainted with the memory of COVID19. So this fall is without question full of uncertainty. Each day brings with it indecision and ambiguity. And yet, I want our congregation to witness how they live each day by faith, by certainty in God's promise, leaving room for doubt and for questions; because in wrestling with the doubts, we are all blessed by God and come to understand more fully the people we were created to be.

What is faith? No better answer is given in the Bible than in the great eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews. Here a tapestry is unfolded, depicting great examples of faith from the record of Old Testament heroes.

In great castles dark tapestries hang on musty walls to portray the exploits of great knights and lords from long ago, preserving the virtues and valors that made the kingdom great. Hebrews 11 is no musty hallway! It is a spiritual walkway adorned by the weaving of God's living Word, depicting faith as the key virtue by which God has made His kingdom great. Hebrews 11 is often called the "Hall of Heroes." But the true hero of this chapter is God who gives faith to His own, by which men and women have done great things in His strength.

Hebrews 11 shows that faith is so important because God's people are surrounded with weakness, poverty, and difficulty. Verse one tells us, *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* The context for faith is a life in which things are hoped for but not yet seen or possessed. Faith grasps things that are promised by God but are so far unfulfilled in our experience. We hope for power in the midst of weakness, peace in the midst of conflict, and for joy in the presence of sorrow. For all these reasons, God's people require faith to persevere in a difficult world.

The largest section of Hebrews 11 is given to the patriarch Abraham. We are told of four things that Abraham did by faith: he obeyed God's call, he lived as a pilgrim in a strange land, as an old man he and Sarah gave birth to a child promised by God, and by faith he offered up that son, Isaac, in obedience to God's command. That is quite a life... all by faith!

So on it goes. The tapestry of faith unveils generation after generation of God's faithful, from Moses and Joshua through the judges, to David and the prophets and even the Maccabean heroes who came after the Old Testament. By faith, they conquered kingdoms, stopped the mouths of lions, and became mighty in war. They endured torture and stood firm in the face of death. Together they proved that by faith a believer has everything he or she needs to triumph against the world's worst opposition.

Hebrews 11 tells what God's people did by faith. The thing to notice about these heroes is not their personality traits, their training, or their upbringing. We are not told that Abraham was a resourceful kind of person or that his personality made him suited for disappointment. The only thing that made him different from others was his faith, and by his faith what a difference he made for the whole world. How did a man like Moses turn his back in the prime of his life on the pinnacle of worldly power and pleasure and riches? It wasn't because Moses was such a moral person. He did it by faith! Without faith, none of these heroes of Hebrews 11 would have lived for God in the ways they did. But by faith, they lived with a power the world knows nothing about and gained a salvation the world has ignored. Because of their faith, verse 16 says, *God is not ashamed to be called their God.*

Faith can do great things in anyone's life. If you live by faith in God, no matter whom you are, you can make a difference for God's kingdom. What really matters is not your strengths or weaknesses. By faith you can be a spiritual hero. Why? Is it because of some power inherent to faith, or because faith will unleash your hidden potential? Definitely not...we aren't superheroes. Verse six tells us that faith can do great things through you, because God *rewards those who seek him.*

What is it, then, that really matters in your life? Hebrews 11 says that what matters most about you, about every Christian, is your faith. Since that is true, nothing is more important than feeding and exercising and growing your faith. When you believe God's Word and trust His promises in the challenges of your life, you enter into this tapestry in which faith's tale is still being told. By faith, you, just as Noah and Abraham and Moses, can do great things by God's power and for His glory.

As I began to reflect on our youth and the heroes of the Old Testament, one great hero came to mind, King David. What does the boy who took on a giant have to tell us about youth in the church and the world? David, who is buried in the city he helped establish, once stood as a young man among his sheep, in the shadow of a giant enemy with his best friend, Jonathan; with his music and poetry and indeed, with God. That part of his life, along with his leadership, his goodness and his ... not so goodness, is all part of his legacy.

David's youth was part of a lifelong trajectory of faith. And his legacy is pertinent to youth ministry today. We do not do youth ministry simply for young people, for distraction, safety or expectation. We do youth ministry because...youth or adolescence... is a part of a lifelong trajectory of our purpose, our call, the reason God has given us to this world.

Like David, our young people have gifts. Like David, our young people carry on family expectations and stories. Like David, our young people face enemies — so many enemies that some days I feel almost too anxious that we cannot protect them or even scratch at the surface of what they need from us. Like David, our young people will write the poetry of our church and they will recite the poetry of their older, more experienced mentors, leaders and parents. They will fail, like David failed. When it comes to watching young people fail or mess up, I, like so many others in youth ministry, wish that I could prevent that failure.

On this day we, as a church take a moment to give thanks to God for the gift of youth in the church and the world. I wish today more than ever we could look across the sanctuary, or the youth room, or the fellowship hall and see what God sees — a life and faith already gifting us with God's image, with the holy hope of what is to come. Amen.