

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
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Sermon for November 16, 2008
Lessons: Psalm 142 and John 11:28-37

FAITH'S SECRET STRENGTH

Let's start with the obvious: Christian faith is faith in Jesus, the Christ – God's Christ or Messiah. Christ is not Jesus' last name but a title identifying him as the one sent by God to change the course of human life and the outcome of history. Jesus became God's Christ for us, not by imposing God's power and authority upon the world, but by representing and fulfilling God's redemptive love. We go wrong, however, if we think of God's love for this world and its people as mere tolerance. God's redemptive love changes minds, hearts, and lives, and it brings justice and peace to human communities. To believe in Jesus, God's Christ, is not, first of all, to gain security but to receive hope. When we care most about security and make it our principal concern, we defend ourselves against life. Fear and suspicion rule us, affecting the way we see other people, especially those we label outsiders. When we truly have hope, we pursue life. With hope, we expect change because we want a better, truer way of life, and so we prepare ourselves for the newness into which we trust God's Christ to lead us. When hope overcomes our natural fear of change, we look to the future and open ourselves to it. Otherwise we look to the past, believing it better than the future. We feel threatened by change, by newcomers, and by all that seems new and different. We may even feel sorry for the young we regard as our own because they will live in their future rather than our past. But in hope, Jesus becomes our guarantor who has gone before us and now walks with us, giving us the courage to leave our past and venture forward with him.

As an adult, I realize that much I have attained in life has come from privilege, whether I recognized my privilege or just assumed it to be natural and right for me. I am, after all, an American, born just when some tremendous threats to life, freedom, and prosperity had recently been overcome (the Great Depression and the Second World War). America was on the rise, making it much easier to hold seemingly limitless hope for our possibilities in the future, without having to give up much security or even consider that a choice between security and hope might ever have to be made.

But, you say, not everyone in America held such high hopes or assumed such open possibilities, and you are right. I am not only an American, but a white, male, Christian American with the added advantage of an Anglo name that ends in a consonant, not a vowel. From the end of the war through the mid 1960's, those mere accidents of birth were

considered entitlements. If I go back and look at my high school yearbook, I see that most of the girls planned to be secretaries, nurses, or teachers – all fine choices but rather limited in number. As far as I could see, my choices were limited only by my own abilities, performance thus far, and willingness to work.

I am not going to continue with a history of what changed in the later 1960's and has continued to change ever since, though not smoothly. My point is Jesus Christ's call to choose the hope that comes from God over the securities of the past and present was not so clear in the time of my childhood. One result was that the churches grew and prospered without much effort or sacrifice, but they did not change much or see much reason to change with our generation. So, now we are mostly gone from the churches. The largest generation in American history mostly vanished from the pews.

From the title of this sermon, you might expect me to identify “faith’s secret strength” as the hope that opens us to change. Not so. I consider hope to be faith’s very prominent and necessary strength that should be no secret in a world that needs hope desperately. By faith’s secret strength I mean it’s ability to handle disappointment, the downside of hope. To allow ourselves hopes and dreams is to risk disappointment. Most of us, unless we have been badly hurt, are willing to take that risk because hope gives vitality and meaning to life. Without hopes and dreams, our lives shrivel like fruit dying on the vine. Without hope, we fall into depression and live in it until some level of depression feels normal.

I can’t tell you how many times in my years of ministry I have been grateful to God and the Gospel of John for showing us Jesus’ empathy with the grief and distress of his friends Martha and Mary, extending to the grief of their neighbors. In that shortest verse of our Bible, “Jesus wept,” we see the “humanity of God.” Jesus is moved. He enters into, feels, and shares the other people’s grief and pain, and his faith does not hold him back because he trusts God for a good outcome. Jesus’ tears are crucial to the message of this story. Without that empathy, Jesus’ raising Lazarus would seem little more than a wondrous magic trick, postponing grief – thanks be to God! – but only just postponing it. Lazarus will die again, but a hope stronger than death has entered human life – a hope that comes, not merely from God’s power, but from God’s love. It’s not that God *can* raise the dead (is capable of doing so) that gives us hope but that God loves us too much to let us go. By entering our grief and distress, Jesus becomes our living link to God’s love, which is not one divine attribute among others. Self-giving love is the nature of all God is, the motive and purpose of all God does.

The secret strength of our faith is it’s ability to handle life’s negatives and transform them by the singular power of vulnerable love. That’s what makes Jesus cry and feel deep distress: vulnerable love, the weakest and strongest force there is. Nothing appears weaker

to human beings who pride themselves on being as powerful and as close to invincible as they can get, but the strength of God is vulnerable love. Paul assures the proud Corinthians that the weakness of God is stronger than human strength, the foolishness of God wiser than human wisdom. The weakness, the foolishness, of God is precisely vulnerable love that enters into and shares the griefs and distresses – yes, even the failures, embarrassments, and sins – that we carry through life.

The pessimist fears the vulnerability of positive thoughts and hopes because they open the door for possible disappointment. The rampant optimist, the go-getter, fears rather the debilitating effects of negative thoughts and doubts. Our faith gives us the strength to deal with both the positive and the negative. We don't have to keep a "stiff upper lip" or "put on a good front" to fool ourselves. No, of course, we don't go around wearing our sorrows on our sleeves, but with faith we can stand up to our regrets and disappointments. The person who dreams will have disappointments, and the one who cares about life and people will have regrets. The optimist says, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." The pessimist replies, "Nothing ventured, nothing lost." The follower of Jesus is strengthened to suffer life's losses without losing hope and help other people through their losses as well.

The psalms help us take our sorrows and distresses to God, trusting God to understand and stick with us if we are angry and frustrated and even if we get angry at God. As Christians, we need that help. We have grown un-healthfully ashamed of any display or admission of weakness or disappointment, as though we think we need to appear invulnerable, plus we have been taught to think real faith is always sure of its beliefs and confident in its hopes. Not so. Doubt is a valid and necessary part of faith, and handling disappointment without denying its pain a vital part of living with hope.

No one in this sanctuary is alone in carrying disappointments with life. If you want to know how many people are carrying disappointments, just count us. Jesus ended his life with bitter disappointments he took to the cross. And I am not, believe me, saying, "Oh, what are you troubled about? Everybody has disappointments. Get up, brush yourself off, and get over it." No, faith in Jesus Christ empowers us to deal with our disappointments, not deny them. When we take them honestly to God, we find healing. We also learn understanding and compassion for each other, which is no small or incidental working of God's grace in the world. In fact, if faith in Jesus Christ is to guide and transform my life, then I need such understanding and compassion more than I need the realization of my desires or dreams. I say that, not to minimize the pain of disappointments and frustrations, of dreams deferred, but to maximize our need exactly what Jesus shows us is the nature and spirit of God's grace and the world's hope: vulnerable love that cares enough to seek understanding and empathy with others, friends and even enemies. It is by changing minds and hearts that God transforms communities and gives renewed hope for this world. Amen.