

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ

Richard E. Sindall, Pastor

Sermon for Thanksgiving Sunday and Pledge Dedication, November 23, 2008

Lessons: Hosea 6:1-6 and Hebrews 11:1-3,8-19

GOING FORWARD BY FAITH

It's easy to give thanks in a time of prosperity, when our hopes and dreams expand, we feel secure, and life looks promising. This November is not one of those times. People in retirement or close to it have reason for anxiety as the value of investments drops. For many in the work force or soon to attempt entering it, confidence is crumbling. In such a time, we are tempted to respond to our losses or feared losses in one or more of four ways that are quite natural and understandable but not healthful or productive. I am not saying these are the temptations bad or unfaithful people have; I'm saying these are natural temptations all people have. So, this sermon is not a simplistic, "Have faith, keep a smile, and everything will go well for you." No, the question is how our faith in Jesus Christ strengthens us to deal with times of disappointment, frustration, and anxiety, and that question applies to us separately as individuals and families but, also, together as a church. How will we, as First Presbyterian Church, respond to this time of economic crisis, and how can we strengthen and encourage each other's faith in such a time?

The four natural but unproductive responses to this kind of distress are:

- To withdraw into ourselves and our separate lives.
- To get down on ourselves, if not actually blaming ourselves at least feeling bad about being who we are or about being the church we are.
- To avoid facing the situation by diverting our attention. This reaction may sound like the first one, withdrawing, but avoidance is more active. In times of personal life-collapse, the one who reacts with avoidance does not stay in bed but goes out and parties, seeking pleasure to avoid pain. In churches, people get very, very busy so they don't have time for the church when it doesn't feel good to be the church.
- The fourth is most dangerous. It is to find someone to blame. "Whose fault is it" that things aren't going better?

These four reactions come from the interruption of our hopes and, maybe, even of our beliefs; they come so naturally that we may not even be aware that our mood has changed. We know our outward circumstances have changed, of course, but we may not realize our own way of dealing with life has shifted off course.

When we began our visioning process some four years ago, we were counseled to discover our beliefs and our hopes as a church, and we set out to do just that. By our beliefs, we did not mean our doctrinal standards but, rather, those harder-to-formulate thought-and-feeling-pieces of our shared trust in God, our looking to God. What do we look to God for? And what do we look to each other for? As we searched for those underlying beliefs, we discovered we had much in common as Christian people, even when we expressed our more doctrinal beliefs in diverse ways. The first statement of our vision became, “We believe there is hope for this world because Christ has suffered and died for it.” As a church, we tied our beliefs and hopes to God’s redemptive love – to the self-giving, self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ. And we turned ourselves as a church outward. We did not say there is hope only for the church, as though the world could just as well be lost, as though God’s love were reserved for the insiders. So we committed ourselves to a life and ministry together that looks outward to the world God loves and Jesus gave himself to redeem.

Things went well. We experienced a new wave of enthusiasm throughout much of the church. More people came to worship services and other activities. We gathered more and enjoyed each other’s company. You could feel the excitement, in a Presbyterian fashion, of course – we weren’t jumping up and down or shouting. But we were happy and expectant. We had children in our Sunday church school again and even in our worship services. We increased our social get-togethers and had fun as a church. We developed a pictorial directory and had quite a few forums and other events to get to know each other better. We tutored Spanish-speaking people in English and formed an online Bible study. We welcomed Bet-El Hispanic Presbyterian Church as a partner in ministry. It felt good to be a church – our church, this one.

Then several things happened. Time, of course, kept on moving, as time does. Our first successes became harder to sustain, as initial successes always do, but we kept the momentum going even as we faced the difficulties realistically. But then that never-welcome intruder, grief, came into our life as a church, followed by the troubles of this year 2008. There is, as we all know, a clash of hope and depression that has our land in a sort of suspended animation. The economic distress we are assured will grow worse, hurting more and more people, affects the mood everywhere, including the churches. It is indeed a constriction and not only a literal credit constriction but a tightening of the spirit that feels as though something were squeezing air from us, as a boa constrictor tightens on its prey. I think we are all feeling at least uneasy about this constriction, and some are already in personal and family economic distress. Beliefs, hopes, and plans suffer a sudden lack of credibility when our security starts to get slippery. It’s harder to move people to think about going forward when they’re having difficulty just maintaining their balance and footing where they stand.

By no accident, our stewardship team chose the Letter to the Hebrews as a source for this year's pledging campaign theme: Hebrews, chapter eleven, which is ironic, isn't it? But this chapter 11 is not about bankruptcy but presents us with examples of faith (sometimes called the "heroes of faith"). Last year, the theme for our pledging campaign was "keep the momentum going." We were on the move, no stopping now. This year is harder. The momentum has slowed, the mood sobered. This year, our theme is "going forward by faith."

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; *and he set out, not knowing where he was going.*" How like the church. How like us and everyone else in good times and bad alike. The poet Robert Burns reminds us of the "best laid plans of mice and men." We never know what lies around the next bend in the road. Consistency in good times lulls us into thinking we can plot life's course with certainty, but we cannot. We go forward because we have no other choice, but Hebrews reminds us we do have a choice about the way we go forward and the spirit of being a church together.

Fear is natural and necessary for the protection of life, and caution can be prudent. But our next hymn, "Let All Things Now Living," speaks of "fearfulness," which paralyzes us and needs to be banished by faith. Having fears is one thing, but being fearful (filled with fear) makes trouble worse than it is or needs to be. At its heart, faith is trust in our God who loves us, whose desire is to give us a future filled with hope, and whose call in Christ is to represent that hope in a world that needs it.

To withdraw would be deadly to our life, ministry, and mission. Churches that cut back in fear go into a downward spiral and die. To blame ourselves for the difficulties and the uncertainties of being a church in a hard time would be unfair and self-defeating. To avoid facing the problems of this time by living as though nothing bad were happening around us would be bizarre. In times like these, people need each other, and there will be people in our communities and quite possibly in our church in serious distress. How can we maintain our own faith if we do not encourage each other's faith? The fourth choice, blaming someone else, is especially toxic in a church. When blaming starts, people doing little or nothing criticize those trying to do something, who in turn blame the ones not helping. Plus, perceived change for the worse makes people suspicious of all changes, however unrelated to the problems, and the smallest changes are the easiest to pick on. We were warned at the outset of our visioning process that nostalgia for the "good old days," left untreated by renewing our beliefs and finding fresh hopes, turns bitter and starts blaming. "It's not the way it used to be" becomes critical of all efforts toward developing a new day in the church. We dare not let the blaming start. It divides churches and pushes God away. But we can go forward together. We can do it – if we go forward by faith.

Abraham and Sarah set out by faith and kept going forward. It's Thanksgiving Sunday, and we have much for which to thank God, much to celebrate, and much to share. And, after all, if faith gives thanks only when things are going well, it really isn't faith, is it? If we will trust, then God will transform a hard time into one that brings us closer together, deepens our understandings of what it means and feels like to believe in Jesus Christ and follow him, strengthens our compassion for other people, and even make us happy. I'm not kidding. The source of happiness is not plenty but thankfulness. I can sit atop a hill of gold and be unhappy if I am not thankful. And I'm not talking about self-deception. I'm talking about trusting God to hold on to us as we hold on to each other, to teach us life, and to lead us forward by our faith into a future made better by the journey we share. Amen.