

August 8, 2010  
Lectionary 19c  
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

### ***SPEAKING OF FAITH***

An agnostic once said: I wish I could have faith like you people—Christians who go to church every Sunday. I wish I could believe in life after death. I wish I could believe that bread and wine become body and blood. I wish I could believe that Jesus is the Son of God and rose from the dead. I wish I could believe that the Bible is true. I wish I could have faith in these unbelievable things.

Is that what faith is? Believing things? Subscribing to a catalog of doctrines? Signing on to the Nicene Creed, Luther's Small Catechism, or whatever the Bible says about something?

Is faith about having the answers? Is faith having the certainty that you are right? Is faith knowing how the world was created? Why there is suffering? What heaven is like and who will be there? Is faith believing in things that can't be proved?

Let me say it right away: That kind of faith is overrated. No wonder people on the street think they don't have faith, and certainly don't want that kind of faith. No wonder some people think we've checked our minds at the door. That our doctrines and dogmas give us answers for everything and that we are certain that we know the truth.

If that's what faith is, some of us would prefer to check "agnostic" on the religious preferences form. Or better yet: the very popular "spiritual, but not religious" brand.

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A couple getting married next weekend compare their relationship to the two main characters in the television series "The X-Files" that was on from 1993-2001. They were surprised that I had never seen it! It sounds like some people watched it Sunday evenings with a kind of reverent devotion we usually ascribe to Sunday morning worship. This cult hit tells the story of two FBI agents who investigate X-files: paranormal or unexplained phenomena. Things that can't be explained scientifically. The pair examine evidence of alien visitors, unseen violent forces, mutated serial killers, even religious miracles.

Fox Mulder is the character who believes the "truth is out there," and is drawn to paranormal activity. But it's Dana Scully who belief.net names as one of the ten most spiritual characters in science fiction. Scully, a medical doctor, balances Mulder's belief in the unknown with her scientific skepticism. She trusts in things she can explain, things that are rational. But her doubts and a miraculous recovery from cancer take her on an unexpected path of faith. She explores the faith of her childhood. And in one episode she asks: What if God is speaking, and no one is listening?

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Speaking of faith, it's a hard thing to do. Speaking of God, maybe we know too much. Or we think we do. Maybe faith isn't so much about beliefs, as it is about trust. Maybe it's more about a relationship, than it is about explaining things.

Speaking of faith, we, along with Jews and Muslims, call Abraham our "father in faith." Abraham trusts in God when everything seems hopeless. He and Sarah do not have an heir. In that day that mean they did not have a future. Yet God promises them descendents as numerous as the stars. Abraham is told to set out, without a map, a compass, or GPS. And no idea of the destination. Crazy!

Imagine: to set out on a journey and not know where you're going. To trust the promises of God. To trust that it will be OK. That God will be with you. To be at peace with the .... unknown.

What if that were the kind of faith we prayed for. The kind of faith we desired from God. To be at peace with all we don't know. All we can't control. All that is out of our hands.

Buddhist writer Sharon Salzberg has written a book on faith. She tells the story of a significant friend and spiritual teacher who suffered an unexpected stroke at age sixty. After she heard the devastating news she tried to imagine him getting well, and being able to look and act just as he had before. At first she prayed that he would completely recover. But then she realized that what she really wanted for him was that he would be sheltered and held. One friend reminded her: “Here and now we have entered the mystery. This is a time for faith.”

By letting go of her need to control the outcome, Sharon was able to relax into the vast space of *not knowing*. To her, faith is letting go in the midst of the unexpected changes of life. (Sharon Salzberg, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, pp. 82-87)

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Speaking of faith, the author of Hebrews calls it the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” Jesus invites us to live with vigilance. We don’t know the hour of his coming. We don’t know when everything in our lives or in the world will change. We don’t know the hour of our death. But Jesus says it will be at an unexpected hour. And invites us to treasure those things in life that will last, that truly matter.

In the recent *Lutheran* magazine, Peter Marty says that Lutheran Christians are at their best when they prize humility over certainty. If faith claims to know too much, it leaves no place for wonder and mystery. When so-called believers are certain they know what God wants, who God likes and dislikes ... God looks more domesticated than our favorite pet!

Novelist Marilynne Robinson considers uncertainty a kind of reverence. As she writes: “There is something about certainty that makes Christianity very un-Christian.”

So speaking of faith, let us not say too much. Let us dip our hands in the water. Let us eat bread and drink wine. Let us cry and let us laugh. Let us wonder and ask questions. Let us cherish life that is sometimes baffling, curious, hidden and even inscrutable. Let us let go of the need to always “get it” or explain it. And when we face the mystery of evil, injustice, or suffering, let us resist the temptation to ask “why.”

Then, maybe, we will see the gift in these three words: *I don’t know*.