**First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford**

**October 18, 2015**

**Start Small**

**Hebrews 11:8-16**

1. Can the news be any more dire?
   1. Flooding in the East
   2. Drought in the West
   3. Refugees pouring out of the Middle East
   4. Shootings in what were safe places
   5. Deceit and slander from civic leaders
   6. Poverty in our midst
   7. Unending troop deployments
   8. Wars and rumors of wars…
      1. At the beginning of World War II, as England began another year of fighting in the war against Germany, CS Lewis turned to the stack of mail on his desk and noticed a letter from a correspondent whose name was unfamiliar to him.
      2. “Dear Mr. Lewis”, the writer began, “I address you by name because, although we have never met, you cannot be a stranger after allowing me – and many others – to know some of your thoughts and convictions in your book, *The Problem of Pain.”*
      3. The letter was from James Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting for the BBC.
         1. What nobody at the time could have guessed – not Welch, not Lewis or anyone else – is that this small letter would usher in a major turning point in the faith of the nation.
         2. For the previous 15 years, Lewis had been a fellow at Oxford’s Magdalen College.
            1. He was a prolific writer and poet.
            2. He was also a new Christian.

After coming to faith in 1931, he wrote an allegory tracing his own faith journey, *The Pilgrim’s Regress.*

In his 1940 publication, *The Problem of Pain*, he explored the question of how an all-powerful God could create a world with evil and suffering.

* + - 1. Welch asked Lewis to present on BBC Radio a series of talks entitled, “The Christian Faith as I See It – By a Layman.”
         1. Six months later — on Wednesday, August 6, 1941 — Lewis boarded the train for the hour-long trip from Oxford to London.
         2. He then traveled on to the BBC’s Broadcast House for the first in the series of five talks.
         3. Each week, at precisely 7:45 in the evening, the “On the Air” light would blink on, and Lewis would spend the next fifteen minutes speaking to a weary and war-torn nation about humanity’s relationship to one higher than itself.
      2. To the surprise of everyone, including Lewis himself, the talks touched the heart of the nation.
         1. Lewis’s clear, step-by-step reasoning, his honest and unassuming tone, and his use of commonsense examples drew in listeners of all types.
         2. The BBC invited Lewis to present a second series of talks several months later, and then a third the following year, and finally a fourth series in 1944.
         3. The talks were originally published as separate works.
         4. Then, in 1952, they were collected into one volume and published as the book the world today knows as *Mere Christianity.*

Many claim it is Lewis’s greatest book.

Lewis shined a light on the mystery of faith.

And it all started with a small letter.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A small letter starting with praise.

1. Our letter to the Hebrews today also sheds light on the mystery of faith.
   1. Chapter 11 verse one even defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”
   2. Abraham is cited as this paragon of faith for having been willing to leave all he knew to follow God’s call and to willingly sacrifice his son.
      1. How could Abraham have done these things?
         1. Can we imagine what it would be like to leave everything we know and go someplace utterly unknown?
            1. Hebrews 11:8 says, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called out…not knowing where he was going.”
         2. Can we imagine asking our loved ones to live in tents as if they were refugees from Syria as Abraham asked Sarah to do?
            1. Hebrews 11:9 says, “By faith he stayed in a foreign land living in tents…”
         3. Can we imagine having children at 100?
            1. Hebrews 11:11 says, “By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren…”
         4. Can we imagine sacrificing that miracle child?
            1. Perhaps you’ve heard the quote from Elizabeth Stone.
            2. “Making the decision to have a child - it is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body. ”
            3. Our own hearts become that much more vulnerable when we have children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.
            4. Would we rationally do any of these things by faith?
      2. That strength of faith which many have derisively called blind faith seems foolhardy, unattainable, impossible, and utterly unlikely.
   3. How could we rational beings with scientific training have that kind of faith?
2. Maybe we’re thinking about faith too narrowly.
   1. Many of our High School students take Advanced Placement classes and one of the toughest is World History.
      1. A recent assignment was debating whether or not the Renaissance happened or if it was an inevitable part of human development.
      2. As our students were preparing for this class, some asked about the Reformation and how theologians and philosophers talked about faith.
         1. In the 17th century in the West, scientists and philosophers such as Isaac Newton and René Descartes believed that they could prove faith in God's existence scientifically.
            1. You might remember the Cartesian slogan of “Je pense, donc je suis” or “I think, therefore, I am.”
            2. They said science was the best path to truth.
         2. The other ways of coming to truth, such as faithfully pursuing art or mysticism or ritual – including religious rituals, were downplayed.
         3. God became a scientific fact, pure and simple.
         4. So our High School students asked, “What’s wrong with seeing God as fact, not faith?”
            1. Theologians from before the Renaissance like St. Thomas Aquinas have said that God doesn't exist like you or me or this podium.
            2. They said you couldn't say God exists because exist is too limited a word.
            3. Aquinas is not as popular today as he was in the 13th century because we have developed a lust for unsustainable certainty.

Our desire to be right, in control, and know-it-alls pushes away transcendence, hope and the mere *Christianity* possibility of faith.

It leaves us with unsatisfactory answers to the toughest questions people have always had:

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Don’t we have to earn God’s grace?

How can I forgive somebody who won’t apologize?

Why did God let this awful thing happen to me or to my loved one?

Is God punishing me?

Is this relationship past healing?

* 1. We deceive ourselves when we think facts and faith are contradictory.
     1. Science and religion were once best friends.
     2. In the fourth century St. Augustine said that if a biblical text contradicted science, believers had to find a new interpretation of that text.
     3. That was the practice right through to the 17th century.
        1. Even at the dawn of the scientific revolution, a witty Vatican cardinal said that in the Bible the Holy Spirit is telling us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.
     4. In the past people knew that science and religion had different goals; they were complementary.
     5. Science can help us diagnose and treat cancer, but it cannot touch the despair and dismay and terror we feel when we get the diagnosis, nor can it help us die well.
     6. For that people turn to religion, or more broadly speaking, to faith, the stories and beliefs that, when put into practice, answer our deeper questions about the more elusive, puzzling, and tragic aspects of our human predicament.[[2]](#footnote-2)
  2. John Calvin writes in his commentary about Hebrews Chapter 11, “We do not have faith in God from things present but from the expectation of things still to come.” (p. 157)
     1. “The Spirit of God shows us hidden things, the knowledge of which cannot reach our senses. We are told of the resurrection of the blessed, but meantime we are involved in corruption; we are declared to be just, and sin dwells within us; we hear that we are blessed, but meantime we are overwhelmed by untold miseries; we are promised an abundance of all good things, but we are often hungry and thirsty; God proclaims that He will come to us immediately, but seems to be deaf to our cries.
     2. What would happen to us if we did not rely on our hope, and if our minds did not emerge above the world out of the midst of darkness through the shining Word of God and by His Spirit?
     3. Faith is therefore rightly called the substance of things which are still the objects of hope and the evidence of things not seen.”[[3]](#footnote-3)
        1. Calvin may have been born 506 years ago, but his wisdom transcends time.
  3. Our closing hymn, Great God of Every Blessing, was written for the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth.
     1. Each stanza ends with Calvin’s motto, sincerely and completely, I offer you my heart.
     2. Calvin believed that every thought, word, choice and action he made was a prompt and sincere offering to God.
        1. It is amusing to think that Presbyterians have evolved into the frozen chosen when one considers how warmly and thoroughly Calvin himself considered our practices to be.
  4. It is our practices keeping hope alive, strengthening our patience, and reminding us that God’s grace is as infinitely incandescent as the stars in the sky.

1. It is our practices that help us respond to the tough, existential questions.
   1. It is our practices pointing to a better way when we hear of wars and rumors of wars:
      1. Republicans vs. Democrats
      2. Israelis vs. Palestinians
      3. Irish Catholics vs. Loyalist Protestants
      4. Hatfields vs. McCoys
      5. Town vs. Village
      6. Neighbor vs. neighbor
   2. Our practices do not have to be large undertakings worthy of a Nobel Peace Prize.
      1. In fact, most practices start small.
      2. Janette Henderson shared about one such small practice at our most recent Presbyterian Women board meeting.
         1. A little boy at the Penny Pincher sale saw a wooden sword he wanted.
            1. He clearly was spending his own money.
         2. He asked Janette how much it cost and she said that it was normally $.50 but because it was half-price day, it would only cost him a quarter.
         3. He asked her to wait for him while he got his money.
         4. When he came back to her, he offered her $.50.
         5. Janette said, “it’s only a quarter today.”
         6. The boy said, “But I want to give the other quarter to the church.”
   3. Jesus taught that if we have the faith of a mustard seed, we can move mountains.
      1. The mightiest of motions start small – like a seed.
      2. Did you know that there are seed vaults strategically cached in remote places around the world to preserve international crop biodiversity?
         1. These seed collections maintain global food security in the event that disaster of any kind wipes out crop variety.
         2. The doomsday vault for all these international seed collections was created in 2008 in one of Norway’s remote archipelagos.
            1. It is built to survive rising sea levels, power outages, and other calamities that might threaten other seed vaults around the world.
            2. Its main storage area is kept well below freezing to preserve the contents and it can hold 4.5 million varieties.
            3. The director of the seed vault says, “there are seeds in the vault that have originated from every single country. It really is the example of true international cooperation. There are seeds sitting on the same shelf from North Korea and South Korea and they get along just fine up there.”
            4. Since the doomsday vault was built, there has not been a need to withdraw any seeds…until now.
            5. And the disaster which threatens crops is – sadly – not a natural one.
            6. The disaster is the fighting between the Syrian government, rebel groups and ISIS which have devastated the country.

These seeds will literally preserve a way of life for countless Syrians who have been dispersed around the globe and for those who might eventually return home.[[4]](#footnote-4)

* 1. We can never predict how our faithful actions, though they appear small and insignificant at a moment in time, will ripple outward to affect others.
     1. Have you ever felt as if you were toiling in obscurity?
        1. While Andy Warhol said we are all destined for our 15 minutes of fame, the majority of us are called to fill less noticeable roles in our schools, churches, communities, businesses, and families.
        2. Only God knows how significant our sown seeds will become.
        3. A century and a half ago a humble minister lived and died in a small village in England.
        4. He lived there his entire life and never traveled far from home.
        5. He never attended college and had no formal degrees, but he was a faithful village minister.
        6. In his congregation was a young cobbler to whom he gave special attention.
           1. This young man went on to become one of the greatest missionaries in modern times.
        7. The village minister also had a son whose character and talents were profoundly influenced by those of his father.
           1. This boy grew to become a widely respected preacher whose sermons influenced the decisions of statesmen.
        8. One might say the village preacher accomplished little in his life – there were no spectacular revivals, great miracles, or burgeoning membership rolls.
        9. But his faithful practices had much to do with giving India its William Carey and England its Robert Hall.[[5]](#footnote-5)
        10. When we think we are having no impact in this world teaching a Sunday School class, providing hospitality at a church event, staying overnight for RAIHN, or donating time, talents and treasure to one of our many outreach ministries, remember the little village preacher who sowed small seeds yielding bumper crops in two nations.

1. Each of us are all called and equipped with a variety of gifts.
   1. Innumerable, infinite stars all have variable gifts.
      1. God calls us to share those gifts through our faithful actions.
         1. Start small and watch what God can do!

1. Paul McCusker. *C. S. Lewis at War: The Dramatic Story Behind Mere Christianity.* Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Press, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Karen Armstrong. *A History of God.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David and Thomas Torrance, editors. *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries: Hebrews and 1 and 2 Peter.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Doomsday Seed Vault.* Huffington Post, September 23, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Quiet Moments With God Devotional.* 50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)