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Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

Reforming By Faith

Excerpts from Hebrews 11 & 12

THE INTRODUCTION

We don't know the name of the congregation to which the letter to the Hebrews was written. We don't know the name of the author, but it was written in the generation after the original disciples had died, and theirs was a community in crisis.

It has been speculated that these Christians were being somewhat harassed for following one who had been crucified as a common criminal; there was some shame attached to this fact. Some beginnings of persecution were also being experienced, though they had "not yet suffered to the point of shedding their blood." They also may have been demoralized because Christ had not yet returned to earth in the way they had expected. It was tempting to give up the faith and just blend in with the surrounding Greco/Roman culture.

In his commentary on Hebrews, Fred Craddock observed that this congregation had an inadequate Christology for the challenges they were facing.¹ In other words, their beliefs about Jesus had to grow up and fill out if they were to practice the faith and face the future with more maturity and courage. When times got tough, Jesus could have slipped away into obscurity, but he put it all on the line. Hebrews boldly proclaims that he ran the race ahead of us and we should look to him.

THE RESPONSIVE READING

Voice One: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Voice Two: Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval, and we understand that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Voice One: By faith Noah and his wife, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save their household.

¹Fred B. Craddock, "The Letter to the Hebrews," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 10.

²You can read more about Anna Howard Shaw in Bob Watson's (a member of TriCon) book: Robert A. Watson, *Before*

Voice Two: By faith Abraham and Sarah obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and they set out, not knowing where they were going.

Voice One: By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

Voice Two: By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land.

Voice One: By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because *she* had received the spies in peace.

Voice Two: All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.

Voice One: If they had been thinking of the lands that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

Unison (the two voices together): Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God and has prepared a city for them.

Voice Two: Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Unison (the two voices together): Consider Jesus who endured such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

SERMON:

Reformers know how to work hard. When I was at BU's School of Theology, I learned about the life of Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, one of its famous graduates. In 1880 Shaw became the first female minister ordained in the Methodist Protestant Church. She also graduated with an M.D., and eventually focused all her energies on reforming society and gaining women the vote. When Anna was just 12, she had been left in charge of the remote family farm in Michigan, working from sunrise to sunset to help the family survive: chopping wood, digging wells, sewing, and teaching school, whatever it took. So perhaps it isn't surprising that in 1912 when she was 65, she was *still* a hard worker. She traveled between and across Arkansas,

Kansas, and Oregon by whatever mode of transportation she had to, giving four or five speeches a day to win support in those states for women's suffrage!²

On the Enneagram personality scale, I would guess that Shaw was a number "1." Folks with this makeup are known either as "perfectionists" or "reformers." They are always working for that "better country" that Hebrews speaks of.

I think most of us, to one degree or another, are reformers; we know what it is to work hard at bettering ourselves, the church, and the world. Whether in our jobs or on a mission trip, we are used to working towards a goal and going through a process, step by step, to achieve it. Many of us are willing to do "all-nighters" if necessary to pass an exam, to give up our "day-off" if it will advance a good cause, and to slog through resistance, as long as the end is worth it. I think of the members of the Transition Team here; they could testify to the hard work of evolving, and volunteers at the Antiques Fair; they work very hard to raise money to make the world a better place.

Western culture is geared this way and grooms us to work hard. Our religious upbringing as Christians contributes too. They don't call it the *Protestant* work ethic for nothing!

Ironically, the first Protestant, Martin Luther, who protested abuses in the church 500 years ago, was ambivalent about the word "work." Partly, this was because the church taught him that one became right with God by doing works of "penance." To be forgiven, it was necessary to find a priest, confess your sin, and follow through on the good work he assigned you – the penance. Yet as much as *he* worked at this, Martin never felt at peace. This belief system eventually ushered in the practice of Christians buying indulgences from the church – passes, if you will – in order to do penance for those who had died and were waiting and working in purgatory in order to be allowed into heaven.

Upon studying the Bible in its original language, Martin Luther realized that faith in God's grace was sufficient for reconciliation; it was not the doing that saved you. This new awareness put him at ease and balanced his life. It also fueled his resolve to right the wrong and reform the church.

I submit that Luther was certainly right to call out the abuses of works for salvation, but he got it wrong when he, or those after him, drew a hard line of dichotomy between faith and works, making it faith *versus* works, because the author of Hebrews doesn't do this! Our passage this morning recounts the heroes leading up to Jesus. They were hard workers and

²You can read more about Anna Howard Shaw in Bob Watson's (a member of TriCon) book: Robert A. Watson, *Before Her Time: And Other Inspirations* (Concord, MA: Innovations Publishing, 2014), Chapter One. There are two copies in our church library.

reformers, and it repeats that they did so *by faith*. **You and I know what it is to work hard at reform, but what is it to work by faith? To reform by faith?**

If you were to look with me at the inside of the Evolve insert in your worship bulletin, containing information about TriCon's neighbors, the list of needs on page 2 could be overwhelming, even discouraging.³ How in the world can we make even a dent in these problems, much less eradicate them?" In the face of such great need, it is easy to grow weary and lose heart.

Well, the author of Hebrews wants to combat defeatism and promote endurance within the church, so he underscores the point that we are not alone in our working and well-doing.

There once was a farmer who needed to haul a load to town. He put the harness and the blinders on his mule, and hooked him up to the heavy wagon. Taking the reins, the farmer said, "Get up Sarah; get up Jacob; get up Daniel; get up Mary; get up Peter; get up Paul; get up Mr. John." At this, the old mule began to pull the wagon. A man standing by commented: "Your mule sure has a lot of names!" "Oh no, just one. It's Mr. John. That's when you saw him start pulling." "But why did you say all those other names first?" "Mr. John is a very smart mule," the farmer answered. "If he thought he was pulling this wagon all by himself, he wouldn't even try!"

Working and reforming by faith is easier when we realize that we are not alone, that there is a "greater cloud of witnesses" – like spectators pulling for and with us, cheering us on! There is also a whole congregation here at TriCon, people with you not only in the pews, but in the town and on the street, around the world even, working hard to reform themselves, the church and the world, doing what God is calling us by name to do!

On October 10, Edward Hensley, a Chicago Marathon runner, discovered that *he* was not alone. With just two miles left, his hip broke and brought him to the ground. Police officer Joe Siska ran to his side to help. He saw in Ed's eyes that he wanted to continue, and he pledged to help him go the distance. Soon Alfredo Martinez joined them, and they found a folding chair to act as a crutch, enabling Hensley to slowly but surely cross the finish line!

Reforming *by faith* is "looking to Jesus," who lived the perfect integration of faith *and* work; giving us someone beyond us to trust, a power greater than ourselves, something *more than can be seen*: Divine accompaniment along our own race. We are not alone. Look to *him* on the journey to that better country.

³You can find the electronic version of this "Learning More About our Neighbors/About How we Neighbor" insert at triconchurch.org via the parishioners page under the Transition Team update section.