

Confidence

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 33
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, November 15, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of my favorite scenes from my favorite musical, *The Sound of Music*, is when Maria, assigned to serve as nanny for the von Trapp family household, sets out on her way to their home. She cannot imagine what the future holds for her there. She has no “nanny” experience. She’d much rather stay hidden away in the convent as a nun, for which she is preparing. So Maria tries to stir up in herself the courage to take on this new job. She claims in her song “I Have Confidence” that she has confidence in the midst of all things and all situations—whether the sun shines or the rain pours down, or whether those seven children put her to the test. Throughout the song she claims: “I have confidence in me!”

Maria’s words imply that it’s a self-generated self-confidence: *I have confidence in me!* Well, I’d be confident, too, if I had anywhere near her vocal range and could reach that high note on “Do-Re-Mi.” I’d be confident, too, if I could manipulate marionettes, care for seven children, and still find time to take down my window drapes and sew a set of play clothes out of them. I’d be plenty confident.

But her song also implies that she has to **convince herself** of this. She sings: “The courage to serve them with reliance. Face my mistakes without defiance. Show them I’m worthy, and while I show them I’ll show **me!**” Then there is that one telling moment, just before the end of the song, as Maria gazes up through the gates in front of the von Trapp family estate, when with a lack of confidence she utters: “Oh, help...” And that’s the truth coming out: “Oh, help...”

How often do you and I try to muster confidence in ourselves in order to face a new challenge out there? And if we lack confidence, how much energy do you suppose we devote to making ourselves at least “look good” in front of others, appear confident, as if to validate ourselves before our employer or co-workers, our teacher, our coach, our friends, our family, our congregation, and even our God? Our second lesson from the Letter to the Hebrews opens up with the truth about our inability to make ourselves “look good” or stand worthy before God. It describes how the Jewish priests in the temple, day after day, would offer sacrifice to the Lord God for the people’s sins. The priests tried to make the people of God worthy to stand before God, worthy and deserving of God’s mercy and love and blessings. That’s a lot of energy being devoted to validating an entire nation. And the writer of Hebrews says it didn’t work. Day after day, in numbing sameness, and with the same sorry result—barely one sacrifice was complete before someone else somewhere else in Israel sinned again. So back to the altar they went! It was a never-ending task. Confidence couldn’t be based on the ability to make proper and perfect sacrifices, do the right things to “look good” in front of God, because it was simply never enough. “Oh, help...” is right.

But before the reader turns away in despair, our writer then says Jesus Christ has made us worthy. Jesus Christ has offered “for all time a single sacrifice for sins...” You see, Jesus himself, the very perfection of humanity, brings us back into the relationship we should have with God. A loving, trusting relationship, which is something God always intended us to have. In fact, the writer implies that this whole entire system of burnt offerings and sacrifices ritually observed in the temple has been effectively discounted and should be dismantled. It is no longer necessary. That is not where confidence is to be found. Instead, the confidence to stand before God, trusting in his love for us, and the confidence to live as God’s people in a world ripe with challenges (a world where some days you do feel as if you are being chewed up and spit out)—the confidence to live faithfully every day is solely based on what Jesus Christ has done for you and me.

For the recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews, that meant figuring out what to do with all that time on their hands, now that they no longer had to build their schedules around rituals of sacrifice and offerings. The question became, how were they now to live?

It’s the same for you and me. All that energy we’ve been wasting on vain attempts to validate ourselves before God or worrying about how to “look good” in the eyes of other people can be energy better spent. Just contemplate this for a moment—what if we took all our striving to “look good” and all our efforts to generate a confidence wrongly-based, and put them to some other use? I figure we’d give PPL a run for its money—don’t even worry about those utility rate increases! Why, we could harness enough electricity with all our energy to light up the northeast alone. Well, maybe not. But I tell you, when old patterns of living are recognized as ineffective, and are dismantled for good, oh, the things we can do in the name of God.

The author of Hebrews suggests three things we can do with all our energy. First, we read this: *...let us approach (God) with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean...*

In other words, God has opened his arms wide for us, and it’s time we used some of our energy not to run away, but instead to run right into those arms with joyful abandon. Having a “true heart” means we can be true here—be authentic in this place, be exactly the human beings God created each of us to be, and we can stop trying to be someone we’re not. It means we don’t have to feel guilty or be afraid, and allow that guilt or fear to drive all our actions. The church needs people who are honest and authentic and free from guilt and fear. And you know, when other people see that authenticity—when they see your genuine joy, when they see the peace you have in your own skin as you live in God’s presence and participate in this community—well, then, they will want that kind of authentic life, too.

Second, the writer suggests this: *Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.*

In other words, we can use our energy to hold onto God’s promises and allow those promises to sustain us. What are some of these promises made known to us in word and meal and baptismal water? That God will never abandon his children ... that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are being poured into us ... that God’s purposes for all creation will one day be fulfilled. Now, it’s true we

often have to live out this hope in direct opposition to external forces, trials and tragedies we encounter. It may be that to hold on to God's promises takes more strength than we think we have. But God **also** promises to give us that strength when we most need it.

Third, our writer urges us to use that energy in one additional and very specific way: *And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

I don't know exactly what was happening in the congregation to which the author of Hebrews was writing, but let's just say there must have been a dip in attendance. Apparently some people weren't coming together for worship and fellowship. They were neglecting the opportunity to live in a faith community. Those who **were** coming are told to provoke one another to love and good deeds. Interesting word here—*provoke*—it really is a word that means something akin to “agitate” or “incite” or “pester.” But that pestering is not intended to be negative in nature. Nor is it to come from some kind of “holier-than-thou” attitude. Rather, we are to provoke one another to live out our baptismal calling as God's children, as disciples of our Lord Jesus. This pestering is nothing more than pure, unadulterated, bold encouragement to each other to live faithfully in Christ. Not a “hands-off” approach, but a real willingness to engage the another in the hard task of being Christians within and without this building. For much too long some of us have taken the passive approach in our own faith life, or in the way we relate to one another here. The author of Hebrews says it's time to change all that. Provoke one another to start participating in the Body of Christ here and then take the Body of Christ out there where it can give life to others.

And as for our brothers and sisters who may have been neglecting to meet with us here—a little pestering might do some good there, too. Let me tell you that, on a regular basis, members of this congregation come up to the pastors and say, “So-and-So hasn't been here for awhile. Haven't seen them in worship. Do you know where they've been?”

Usually, I don't know where they've been. It is, after all, a big congregation. Yet I often have the strong sensation from our conversation that I'm being asked to be the one to find out. Well, I'm going to lob it on back to you. Maybe our friends who aren't here need to hear from you. Sure, the pastor can call, but maybe **your** “pestering” them with your love and concern and encouragement will be just the thing that brings them back. Or heals their hurt. Or clears up their misunderstanding. Or responds to their need. Or reminds them that they, too, have been made welcome and worthy through Christ to run right back into the arms of our loving God with joyful abandon.

You see, ultimately, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews not only wants us to be authentic before God, but authentic with one another. For that's what will help build up this Body of Christ. And I am confident that we can—and will—do it. By the help of God. **AMEN.**

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