

## **Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family**

### **Title: What is Faith?**

### **Lesson: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 NRSV**

*11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup> Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. <sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.*

*<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup> By faith, with Sarah's involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup> Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."*

*<sup>13</sup> All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, <sup>14</sup> for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> But as it is, they desire a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.*

The chapter 11 of Hebrews we read today is called the scripture of Faith. Today's scripture reminded me the story of Tom that I heard from my professor in college. Tom was a freshman in college and just finished the Spring semester. He was very excited about the summer break he was given. And he was invited to an end-of-semester party by one of his friends, so he went to the house where he was invited. There were already many cars parked in front of the house. He managed to park and entered into the house. It was a very big and nice house. The inside of the house was already crowded with his friends and many people. They were drinking and dancing to the upbeat music. Tom hung out with them too. It was getting dark and dark while they were enjoying the party. All of them had too much to drink with red faces. To add more to the amusement, Tom climbed up to a table and shouted to everyone in the room, promising that he would dive from the pool's diving board in the back yard. People cheered loudly for his promise.

Everyone came out to the backyard to watch Tom dive. When Tom got on the board, the height was higher than he had imagined. When he looked down from the diving board, he started to get scared. However, Tom couldn't give up diving because people were cheering him on. And, if he gave up and came down, he would surely be called 'coward.' When he stood on the edge of the board to dive, it was so dark that he couldn't see the swimming pool was full of water or not. If the pool was full of water he would be safe after the dive, otherwise he would be seriously injured. With many concerns and worries, he couldn't dive easily. When he couldn't dive and he couldn't even give up diving, there were two things he could do on the board. The first was to use his rational reason as far as possible to come up with evidence that the pool was full of water. He tried to remember whether the pool was full of water. He also used his rational reason to deduce the possibilities that the pool was filled with water, but in the back of his mind there were fears like, 'What if it isn't filled with water?' The second was that he would just dive into the water, believing that the pool was full.

Friends, what would you do if you were Tom? Would you continue to try to find the possibilities that the swimming pool is full of water? Or would you stop reasoning and thinking and just dive into the water with faith that the pool is full of water?

I think these questions can also be applied to our journey of faith. Some like to prove the presence of God, so they try to find the evidence to prove the presence of God by using their rational reason, although we cannot fully understand God because God is beyond our reason. On the other hand, some believe in God blindly, so they believe in God blindly without questions and doubts, thinking that it is a sin or a bad thing to have a question about the presence of God. And, some read the Bible, try to understand Christian traditions, judge rationally, and try to experience the presence of God in their lives whenever they have questions about God.

What is faith? Faith is essential and important in our journey of faith, but it is also difficult to define what faith is. Sometimes people talk about great faith and little faith. The disciples of Jesus also thought that there is great faith and little faith. One day Jesus taught his disciples about forgiveness. Jesus taught that even seven or seventy times, if your brother or sister sinned and then repented, you must forgive them. However, it is not easy to forgive an enemy to anyone. Forgiveness was not easy for the disciples either, so they asked Jesus: "Jesus, increase our

faith!” The disciples understood that faith was something that could be increased. But Jesus' understanding of faith was different from theirs. Jesus gave an example through a mustard seed saying: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you”

Have you ever seen a mustard seed? A mustard seed is really tiny. Why did Jesus compare faith to a very small mustard seed? This was because Jesus' understanding of faith was different from that of his disciples. The disciples thought that there was great faith and little faith, but for Jesus, faith was not a matter of little or great, but a matter of having or not. For Jesus, whether great or little, if you had faith, you could love and forgive others.

Hebrews 11 says about faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.” The Bible says: “by faith our ancestors received approval.” Here again, the size of the faith does not matter. Anyone who has faith becomes a child of God, and whoever has faith can enter the kingdom of God.

Hebrews 11 introduces the story of Abraham and Sarah. We often know Abraham as an ancestor of faith, who had a deep relationship with God and had strong faith, but he was not a man of faith from the beginning. Verse 8 says: “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.” To get to the land God had promised Abraham, Abraham had to go through Egypt, and he was afraid that the Egyptians would kill him and take his wife. So he introduced his wife to the Egyptians as his sister. He obeyed God's word and left his hometown, but he wasn't sure that God would protect him like Tom, hesitating whether or not to jump on a diving board. But God came to him in a vision and said: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; Your reward shall be very great.” Thankfully, God was with Abraham and protected him during his journey of life.

One day God said to Abraham: “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” As Abraham was counting them, God said: “So shall your descendants be.” Although God promised Abraham countless descendants like the stars, he still had no children for over 10 years. The more he grew older, the stronger his desire to have children. So, he began to think realistically that God's

promises were impossible to happen. In the end he slept with Hagar, Sarah's maid, and they had a son named Ishmael. However, God promised him a son through Sarah, his wife.

25 years had passed since Abraham left his hometown. For 25 years, his prayers had not been fulfilled. During that time, he was resigned that he would have no children with Sarah. They could never believe God's promises because they were already too old to have children. But when the appointed time God had promised arrived, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. Although Abraham was not a man of faith from the beginning, he was transformed to a man of faith little by little through his journey of faith.

Friends, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. We experience various events throughout our lives. Sometimes things make us happy, sometimes things make us frustrated. And sometimes we may feel that God is not answering our prayers when we pray, and sometimes we may want to doubt God's presence. But beloved, whenever we feel like that, I want you to remember that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. In the case of Abraham, Abraham misunderstood and doubted God's promises. However, God was always with him, and God molded him like a pottery. What Hebrews is trying to tell us is persevering faith. Beloved: I pray to God every day that our faith may gradually deepen and mature and be more like Jesus. May God shape our lives like pottery, and may our faith mature little by little and day by day, and may we be transformed into people of faith like Abraham. Amen.