



First United Church of Oak Park

By Faith

Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

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Are you person of faith? Some of you are probably thinking, “Well I’m here sitting through this church service, aren’t I?” In common usage, this often means do you have a religious affiliation. Or, maybe when I asked if you were a person of faith, you thought, “I’m not sure if I believe in [fill in the blank with your supernatural being or phenomenon of choice].” The other common usage of that question is “are you a person with beliefs in the supernatural?”

So what does it mean to be a person of faith? Hebrews 11 certainly has a lot to say about faith. In the only 40 verses of this Chapter, the word faith appears 28 times! So if we’re ever going to grow in our understanding of faith, I feel like we’ve got a good shot at it here.

One quick problem... the Book of Hebrews was originally written in Greek and in studying this Chapter I noticed that there are some possible issues with our usual English translations. If we were going to stick with the English translations we know and not look back at the Greek, then we would read Verse 1 as, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things unseen.” At face value, I’d say belief in the supernatural, our second common usage, feels like a pretty good understanding. Being sure about things that you can’t see and you can’t prove. But our translation issues have already begun...

1. The Greek word “hypostasis” is translated here as “assurance.” Greek scholars say that hypostasis anywhere was used to indicate “sediment,” “substantive reality,” “being,” or my favorite: “actualization.” Hypostasis made its way from Greek to English. In medicine, the word refers to the accumulation of fluid and in philosophy it refers to an underlying reality or substance, as opposed to that which lacks substance. Substantiation. Actualization. So perhaps faith is showing the substance of the thing. The word “assurance” feels like a weak replacement for substance and actualization. Okay, so scrap assurance and we’re going with the substantive reality. Faith is the substantive reality of things hope for. With me so far?
2. Next problem: the Greek word elenchos is translated as “certainty” in the English we read today. Again, Greek scholars say this word was used to talk about cross-examination, about refuting a claim and providing evidence to the contrary. Certainty seems related, but it’s not the same as “the proof of something.”

So, in case it's all Greek to you (had to do it) and you got lost in this little Greek tutorial, here's what we have found to likely be a more accurate translation of Verse 1. We're scrapping faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the certainty of things unseen. Instead, what we've come up with is,

“Faith is the substantive reality of things hoped for. It is the proof of things unseen.” Now what could it mean, practically speaking?

My dad is a recently retired preacher. One Sunday long ago, to my mother's horror, his children's sermon involved inviting children to do a trust fall backwards off the piano bench. It may have been a lawsuit waiting to happen, but the message sure got through! He said to the child, “Do you believe that if you fall, I will catch you?” The child said yes, and my dad said, “Then go ahead and do it.” He said, now a “belief” is saying, “I bet you'd catch me if I were to fall.” Faith is the act of falling. Belief comes first; faith is the action that comes next. Faith, the action, is the substantive proof that the belief was true. Once faith has happened, it's no longer a belief. It's a sure thing. That child believed my dad would catch them, but since they acted in faith and fell, they KNOW their belief was correct. Thank goodness it was, because that kid's parents would have transferred their membership to another church if the pastor had dropped their child on the chancel!

This understanding of faith as the act that gives substantive proof of what we believed to be true, makes everything that follows in the Book of Hebrews make a lot more sense to me. By faith, Abraham left his homeland having nothing going for him and no clue where he was going. He was as good as dead, but his act of faith led to a demonstration of who God is and what God is about because that journey changed the course of the people of God forever.

Abraham isn't the only person in Chapter 11; there are a bunch of them who act “by faith.” It talks about Abel, Enoch, Noah, Isaac, Jacob--all acting by faith. What comes next after all these acts of faith are enumerated in Hebrews 11? Hebrews Chapter 12, which says, therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also run the race with perseverance!” We get this verse wrong. We think that this cloud of witnesses is there to watch us like proud grandparents at our cross-country meet. That's not what it means. Chapter 11 just told us what kind of witnesses they are. Remember “elenchos” that is used in legal setting to talk about evidence? They are witnesses like a witness in a courtroom. They are the ones whose actions offer the evidence; the proof of things unseen. These are the witnesses to who God is and what God is doing. So Hebrews 12 is telling us, since you've got all this evidence, you'd better act on it! In our action, we too will be witnesses and have the proof to show others who God is and what God is doing. Once we act in faith, we have the proof. Faith, then, is not belief. It is the action proving the belief.

What do you believe, then? I have had the great joy of getting to know some of you and having wonderful conversations about your beliefs.

Some of you have told me you believe that God has a preferential option for the poor as demonstrated in the life of Jesus. What if you could, by faith, prove it? What if you were to act in faith and your actions became the proof?

Some of you have told me you believe that Black lives matter to God. What if you could, by faith, prove it? What if you were to act in faith on that belief and your actions became the proof?

Some of you have told me you believe that all people have a God-given right to bodily autonomy and that abortion access is holy. What if you were to act in faith on that belief and your actions became the proof?

Some of you have acted in faith already on these and many other beliefs and your actions have already become proof of who God is and what God is doing. There is more to do. "Faith is the substantive reality of things hoped for or expected. It is the proof of things unseen." So I'll ask you again, are you a person of faith?