

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16, 38b-40 “Mystic Sweet Communion” Rev. Janet Chapman

In 2016, Bradford and Bryan Manning left their jobs and started a clothing company. You can shop for their incredibly soft shirts on their website like any other clothing company. Or you can take their Shop Blind Challenge. Pick your price point and they will send you a product sight unseen. Their motto for the challenge: “Trust us, it’s worth it.” They started this challenge as a way for others to understand their condition and help raise money to cure it. Both Bradford and Bryan have Stargardt disease, a form of macular degeneration, where you lose your central vision and possibly keep some of your peripheral. Their company, Two Blind Brothers, employs visually impaired workers and all the profits go to research. Their motivation is simple: they believe with enough funding, there will be a cure for blindness within the next 10 years. With enough funding, we have seen such things happen with advances in managing life-long AIDS, in moving towards remission, even cures, of various forms of cancer. Medical conditions that a few years back were considered untreatable and hopeless are now believed to be curable with the proper scientific advances.

What do you believe? What do you strive for, hope for, even though you can’t see it yet? Today’s text invites belief which is backed up with action and intention, in other words, faith. Faith trusts the promise of God’s yet to be, the coming to reality of something we cannot see, is not visible right in front of us. Hebrews 11 could be called the Hall of Fame of Faith. By faith, Abel... by faith, Enoch... by faith, Noah... by faith, Moses. The text must have been written for such an anniversary as we are celebrating today. It takes a much longer view of history than this congregation has, of course, going all the way back to

Abraham and Sarah, our first parents in faith, and it even goes behind them to remember Cain, Abel and Noah. It reaches that far back, and then permits us to add at the other end and bring the list of the faithful up-to-date by the names of community folks, family members, and even our own names as key players in the last 60 years that is part of that longer memory. You can read such names and see their photos on the walls around you. You can take a walk down memory lane with many of the projects and ministries that have been a part of this church's faith story as you stroll by the various story boards. These are stories of faith you see depicted around you and faith is best learned, as Hebrews teaches, through action, through the journey in which people, having been met by God, venture forth with God into the unseen, into the unknown. We are invited to think about faith not as a set of mandates to be affirmed, not as a creed or a list of questions and answers, but rather as a journey. Faith is a venturing forth with God, just like Abraham and Sarah, without any proof that things will turn out like we expect.

Take a look at where you are seated this morning. Nothing is as you might have expected...everything in this sanctuary has been moved around. Nothing in this space is bolted down, fixed and unmovable except the carpet. I wonder if that was an intentional choice by those who built this space in the very beginning? Could it be there was an understanding that being a disciple of Jesus is never stagnant, that following Christ involved vision not perceived with our eyes but with our hearts? It is far more exciting when it is unpredictable – it's an adventure, a pilgrimage. So we come here today to remember not to settle down, not to seize our favorite spot in this room, because it is all a jumble. We come as followers of Christ to summon up the fortitude, to catch our breath and glimpse

God's vision to venture forward. We come to sit around a table to commune together and remember what faith is all about – the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see. We are in a space that is constantly evolving and changing because that is what faith in Christ entails. Our forebearers in the faith kept their eyes focused on the promise ahead, looking to the future, not seeing fulfillment now, nor having any logical reason to hope, but hope they did.

Here in this church, we do spend time nurturing, recalling and enjoying the past, and that's ok. But as Hebrews says, it's the nature of faith to look into the future, to be leaning toward God's promises that have not yet been fulfilled, but will be fulfilled by God. Take a moment to consider those folks who, by faith, founded this church. Imagine what it was like for them to say, "We think God wants us to venture forth and build a church where there isn't one." Can you see them, in your mind's eye, meeting in someone's living room, planning, strategizing, brainstorming? Where did they come up with the money to gather a church, then build the first building? Surely there were doubts, nay-sayers, too expensive, not enough people, not enough givers, and on and on. Yet they persevered – hang around long enough today and you'll hear more about that. Yet they persevered. Only one of our founders lived to see our church as it stands today. I wonder if any of the early folks could have imagined a fully functioning congregation such as we have? They had to have kept their eyes on the future; they couldn't grow too overwhelmed by what they didn't know of what was to come; they couldn't demand God to work on their timelines. Biblical and life stories teach us that a walk with God is a journey of ups and downs, gifts and sacrifices, hills and valleys. Rather than talking about taking Christ into our hearts, or anywhere else,

they learned that it is Christ who takes us places we never thought we would go. They measured success one small step at a time, rather than to regard as success, only what was fully complete and accomplished. But we are not here today to pat ourselves on the back for a satisfying 60 years of ministry and rest on our laurels. If so, then we dishonor the legacy of all those who made this day possible.

We are here to keep our lives based on a vision from God, a mystic sweet communion as our first hymn spoke of, that is still being built. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman believes that Hebrews chapter 11 was written primarily to get to the last 2 verses we heard read: “Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.” This ending affirms that all these ancestors did well, but they didn’t get there; they didn’t receive the full promise. The realm of God didn’t come in their lifetime, and all the deep issues of God’s mission in Redding remain still unfinished and unsettled. They didn’t get it all done, and neither have we. It’s a strange couple verses – the author is saying that how their lives count actually depends on our lives. How well they did is determined by how well we do. What we do decides the quality of their faith. The present actions of the faithful decide about the significance of the past. This letter to the Hebrews was written to people in the early church when faith was risky and dangerous. It is written to say to the listening congregation, “Everything is up to you.” You get to decide the value of what they did. Do any of you remember about how to keep score in bowling? When you bowl a frame, if you get a spare or a strike, you mark it down; but what you bowl in the next frame or two determines the value of what you have already

done in the previous frame. The intergenerational ministry for the church is like that. The value of the first 60 years in the eyes of God depends upon what is done now. That gives today and tomorrow and the next decades of this church enormous power over the past. You can now determine what this history adds up to. It gives this present generation the capacity to invalidate the last 60 years of faith by copping out. But it also gives us the immense opportunity to maximize and enhance what has been done here. This congregation has dedicated itself to many church programs and mission efforts, but how that counts in the end depends upon us now.

Therefore, the second task of this church on our anniversary occasion is to begin asking what will the church be now? How will we define ourselves for the future? In 1846, a slave named Dred Scott had the audacity to sue the St. Louis Circuit Court for his freedom. His argument was that he had resided with his master in states where slavery was illegal, therefore, he should also be free. However, the decision of the courts, all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1857, was that because blacks were not legal U.S. citizens, they couldn't sue in federal court. Therefore, Dred Scott remained a slave. But instead of accepting that designation, he tried in every way possible to live his life as a free person, setting aside that definition of slave wherever he went. His powerful vision of freed blacks gave him the courage to challenge the system, and to live into the future, long before the Civil War ever occurred. The people in Hebrews lived life, sight unseen regarding the future, but with a mystical sight that came only from divine inspiration. How might we define ourselves and live into the future, so that the mystic sweet communion of all God's people, past, present, and future can be maximized and protected forevermore? It's up to you!