

“The Hall of Fame, Part I”

Liturgical Date: Proper 14 (C)

Primary Text: Hebrews 11:1-16

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 9th Sunday after Pentecost is the Epistle Lesson from Hebrews 11. Over the next two Sundays we will examine the entirety of the Eleventh Chapter of Hebrews and the first few verses of Chapter 12. The title of today’s sermon is “The Hall of Fame” as this is the first installment of looking the vital role of faith in the Old Testament Saints listed here for us in the Bible. **GOD MAKES IT CRYSTAL CLEAR THAT THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN PLEASING GOD IS FAITH SO THAT WE UNDERSTAND IT IS ONLY BY FAITH IN JESUS THAT WE CAN TRULY BE OBEDIENT AND ENTER THE BETTER AND ETERNAL HOME.**

When one thinks about “The Hall of Fame”, the first thing that jumps to the minds of many people is a place where those with incredible athletic prowess and success are “enshrined” to be remembered their achievements. Some may think of other areas where one has success such as music or another field. Who here has been to a “Hall of Fame”? Would anyone who has be willing to share which one? (allow congregation to interject which Halls of Fame they have visited) The most prominent Hall of Fame I have visited was the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, when I was a teenager. It still remember it as an awe-striking experience. I also very much want to get to Cooperstown, New York, to see the Baseball Hall of Fame-but so far have never come close to being able to do that. Perhaps one day.

Now there are also some lesser-known and unusual “Halls of Fame”. These include: Toy Hall of Fame (Rochester, NY); Towing and Recovery (Chattanooga, TN); Pin Ball (Las Vegas, NV); Robot (Pittsburg, PA); Quilters (Marion, IN); Barber (Canal Winchester, OH); and of course you would not want to miss an exciting visit to the Insurance Hall of Fame on the campus of the University of Alabama.

But what about God? Does God have a Hall of Fame? Many have looked at our reading from Hebrews 11 and called this the “Faith Hall of Fame” or simply the “Hall of Faith”. This is because in this passage the God-inspired author of Hebrews runs through a pretty impressive catalogue of Old Testament Saints. All together in the reading for this Sunday and next 16 individuals are given as “inductees” into this Faith Hall of Fame and even more are implied. It is a pretty impressive list, isn’t it? Not surprisingly, Abraham and Moses (next Sunday) are given the most ‘ink’. But this week we also see Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah. Next Sunday we will hear about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob again as well as Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel. Notice that not only men are admitted into God’s Hall of Fame, but women: Sarah and Rahab are also noted.

In today’s reading we heard about some of the impressive accomplishments of this Hall of Fame class. Abel offered a better sacrifice, Enoch never died, Noah built an ark thus preserving the human race and animal kinds, Abraham traveled a long distance to and settled in Canaan, Isaac and Jacob inherited the promise, Sarah bore a child at an advanced age and from her and Abraham innumerable descendents came. We hear more impressive achievements next Sunday. So they had the resumes, the “stats” if you will. People would look at them and say, “yes they are all stars and

deserving of recognition.” But the question we must ask is, are the great things they did in service to God the reason they end up in the Hall of Fame?

Actually it is not their great works that earn them admission. In fact, that it wasn't is the main point of the whole passage. There is a word that appears over and over again in our reading. It is the Greek word *pistis*, which in English we know as faith. The word “faith” occurs 11 times in the 16 verses of our reading from Hebrews 11 today and it occurs 14 more times next Sunday. When each of the members of the Faith Hall of Fame are introduced it says “by faith”. By faith Abel, by faith Enoch, by faith Noah and so on. Without faith, no one gets in. Verse 6, *“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him”* GOD MAKES IT CRYSTAL CLEAR THAT THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN PLEASING GOD IS FAITH SO THAT WE UNDERSTAND IT IS ONLY BY FAITH IN JESUS THAT WE CAN TRULY BE OBEDIENT AND ENTER THE BETTER AND ETERNAL HOME.

But didn't these men and women do great things, many of which are described here? Of course, but the point is that without faith they would not have done these things and even if they did it would have been impossible to please God without the works being done in faith. When one has faith, there will be fruit of that faith.

And if we think of athletes that are in the various Hall of Fames of the sporting world yes, they had impressive accomplishments. Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron crushed massive amounts of home runs. Michael Jordan played great defense, led the league in scoring 10 times, and won six NBA championships. Walter Payton, Jerry Rice, and Dan Marino piled up yards on the football field. But I would challenge you with this. Of all of the

people in the sports' hall of fames, I don't think you would find any of them that did not have God-given natural talent. Yes, you can get better at a sport by eating right, training harder than others, and having fiery dedication but that will only take you so far. If your body is certain size and your talent is at a certain level you can only improve so much. Charles Barkley was known as "an overachiever" as one of the aggressive rebounders and toughest post players in basketball history, despite being under-sized for a power forward. But he was still 6 foot 6. Without a measure of God-given talent you can't get into the athletic hall of fames, no matter how hard you work.

You may not know this, but my father is a gifted athlete. Even into his 40s at 5 foot 10, he could still dunk a basketball. He starred in high school sports and even played college football, finishing as the all time leader scorer in his school's history. But I guess the natural ability missed me! Despite my lack of natural talent, I did like to play sports. My strategy was that I had to work harder and be more intense than others to get playing time. Believe it or not, I used to play a lot of basketball when I was younger. I was rail-thin back then and have decent height (Gumby). I would usually get chosen fairly early for pick-up games because I would battle in the post relentlessly for rebounds and put backs. But at 6 foot 2 on a good day and not much a vertical leap, there was only so far I could go with my basketball ability. I just didn't have the physical tools or natural talent to go any further.

So why am I telling you this, what's the point? My point is that to achieve the highest level of success you must have talent before you put up the numbers that can get you into the elite. Hard work will not get you to that level. In applying this to our text, these in our Hall of Fame of Faith

could not work their way in. A person may do some good works and be seen in the eyes of others as a pretty decent, or even a model, citizen but that won't get them into the eternal kingdom. None of those works can get you into as verse 10 says, "*the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.*" Faith must *precede* the works that are pleasing to God.

So we have seen that faith is not only important, but essential to being a part of God's eternal kingdom. This is the point that God is making in the book of Hebrews here. As the title of the book tells us, its original audience was Jews. The overarching point is that Jesus is greater than everything and everyone: the Law, the prophets, the priests, and the sacrificial system. The original readers of Hebrews would know all of the people brought forth in Chapter 11. And no doubt they thought they were great people because of the great things they had done. But God is telling the Jewish people here that it is in fact their faith that is what pleased God. They would not have been able to achieve what they did without faith. Even today, a false idea persists among many that people in the Old Testament were saved by works and people in the New Testament by grace through faith. Hebrews 11 tells us that this is completely wrong. People in the Old Testament were saved through faith as well, just as people in the New Testament Era to today. In the Old Testament saving faith was in the promise of the Messiah and in the New it is in faith of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who has come and redeemed the world. If you need any more evidence of this, St. Paul makes this clear as well, especially in Galatians and Romans 3-4.

But what is faith? This is an important question to answer as we have seen that it is essential for forgiveness, life, and salvation. There are also many misconceptions about what is today. I want to address some of those before this sermon ends.

God wanted the readers of Hebrews to understand what the faith He speaks of is as well. Chapter 11 starts out with that great definition of faith, *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”* Faith is something that exists internally, but is expressed externally. When one has faith they have hope and belief in things they cannot see. Verse 2, *“For by it (faith) the elders obtained a good testimony.”* The substance of faith is not something we can put under a microscope or see in CAT scan. But it is certainly real. In explaining this, the example of creation is given in verse 3, *“By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.”* We see the creation. We see the world around us. However, it is in faith that we believe God when He says He created it all out of nothing in six literal days.

And we must understand that faith in the Biblical sense is not just intellectual knowledge that something is true. As the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states (V 183), *“Faith is not only knowledge in the intellect, but also confidence in the will.”* I have used the example of “foot disease” before and I share it again today. You when people speak of faith today you hear things like “just believe” and as long as you take your cue from *Journey* and “don’t stop believin’” then everything is going to be OK. But even the devil “believes in” God in an intellectual sense. Many feel that if you just “believe in something” than that is what matters. People believe in a lot of things, but it can just be an intellectual exercise. The belief can only be as far as logical evidence takes them. It can depend on the actions of others.

But the faith that Hebrews speaks of goes much further than that. The faith that God gives is a trust in Him for life and salvation-not just an

intellectual, experimental, or conditional faith. It is a *trust*. In fact, a good argument can be made that we should use that word “trust” more than we do.

And the most common misconception about the saving faith the Bible speaks of, one that is unfortunately found in many quarters in the church, is that faith is something that we do, that we choose to create in ourselves. But we cannot even believe in the promised Christ without the work of the Holy Spirit, who creates and sustains faith. We have to be very careful not to “have faith in our faith” as if it is something we created. You see, we know that we are fallen sinners. So if faith came from within us, then our sinful nature would not allow us to have a true and trusting faith.

True faith is a gift of God, something He works within those He calls to faith. It is not something we do, but that God gives us as a gift out of His divine mercy and goodness. Please don't forget that. As Luther wrote, *“Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith ... (faith) is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born again of God.”*

And when we have that faith that is the work of God the Holy Spirit, amazing things happen. While we cannot see the actual substance of faith, as I said we see the fruits of that faith. When we see our “Hall of Fame” of faithful Old Testament saints in our text, it was because they trusted God that they were used in these mighty ways. Remember that I emphasized that this true faith from God is a trust in God. If you really and truly trust God, then you will do what He says. Think of some of the people in Hebrews 11. God asked them to do pretty crazy things from the perspective of the world: build a giant boat because a flood is coming, leave the land of your father and move to a far away and unknown place, have a child at 90 years old-and there are even more examples that we will see next Sunday. Can you

imagine that they would have acted in the way they did if they hadn't trusted God?

So now we know what this faith is that God speaks of in Hebrews. We know that the impressive accomplishments of these "hall of famers" only occurred and pleased God because of faith. We know that this faith is not a generic "belief", but a God given saving faith in Jesus Christ. And next Sunday we continue to examine the rest of this passage with more examples of faith and what this means for us. **GOD MAKES IT CRYSTAL CLEAR THAT THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN PLEASING GOD IS FAITH SO THAT WE UNDERSTAND IT IS ONLY BY FAITH IN JESUS THAT WE CAN TRULY BE OBEDIENT AND ENTER THE BETTER AND ETERNAL HOME.**

But as I close I want to leave you with one more piece of good news. While the Hall of Fames of the world are only open to a select few, God's Faith Hall of Fame is not limited to only those that we read about in Hebrews 11. Admission to the eternal kingdom of God has not been closed, in fact the gates stand open through Jesus Christ. To enter the eternal kingdom with these great saints we do not need to put up big stats or an impressive list of accomplishments in any field, but to have faith. God will use His sons and daughters in a variety of ways-some will go down in the history books and the works of others will be forgotten by most after their time on earth is ended. But in faith, God has given believers what we need. Live in and live out that faith.

Amen.