

Hebrews 11:1-3

August 10, 2025

Rev. Jennifer Gleichauf

Measuring Faith

This scripture is one of the best known verses about faith in the Bible and yet, it doesn't really define faith exactly does it? The assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen. It reminds me of a recent conversation I had with a young adult about faith who was asking: is it something we do or something we have? Does it change in amounts or do you just have it or not?

I had already been thinking about faith as I prepared to take our youth to this year's Triennium as I thought a lot about what I hoped they would get out of the experience. There were lots of goals or hopes I had for our trip. I wanted the youth to get to know each other better. I wanted to give them that intense experience together that only happens when you do something like spend 8 hours on a bus and then every waking moment together. I wanted to give them something to remember. I wanted them to meet youth from other places in the country who share a similar church experience. I wanted them to see that the Presbyterian Church is bigger than it seems and that there are other young people who love God and church and youth group. And I can definitively say we did those things. Those are the kind of goals I can tick off and say we definitely accomplished. But perhaps most of all, I found myself wanting our week away to be an experience which would deepen or expand or grow our youth's faith, and that, well that, is much harder to measure or tick off.

I can tell you what I saw. I saw youth who participated fully in worship and small group experiences. Youth who paid attention to powerful messages delivered by preachers; who listened to the lyrics of the songs played by the worship band and sang along; who listened to the readings of scriptures. I saw youth who put their arms around each other and swayed to the music and who clapped for the various poetry and dance performances.

And I can tell you what I heard. I heard them laughing together and sharing things about themselves with one another. I heard them tell me that they felt like this was a meaningful, powerful experience. I heard them say they were glad they came and that they would want to participate in other experiences like this one.

But does that mean their faith grew or deepened or expanded? How would I measure that?

So, back to our scripture from Hebrews today to try and get some insight into faith - the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. In other words, faith is the knowing we have about the world that cannot be proven in the normal ways science might ask us to prove things. It is what we believe about our place in the world, our relationships with each other and a belief in something larger than ourselves, in our case, we call that God. It is the hope we have that there is something more happening in the world than what we can prove with data or numbers or tangible things we can see.

Faith is certainly not the only thing like this. For example, it is hard, maybe even impossible, to prove friendship. How do we know our friends are our friends? Our friends could have many motives other than friendship for associating with us— perhaps they are after our money, our time, our other friends or some other reason. There is no way to prove that friendship is genuine. Still, most of us feel confident in the truth of some, if not all, friendships in our life. We believe our friendships are real.

In the book, *The Little Prince*, the fox says to the boy that the greatest of life's secrets is "it is only with the heart that one can see right, what is essential is invisible to the eye."

Preacher Frederick Buechner says, "almost nothing that makes any real difference can be proved. I can prove the law of gravity by dropping a shoe out the window. I can prove that the world is round if I am clever at that sort of thing—that the radio works, that light travels faster than sound. I cannot prove that life is better than death or love is better than hate. I cannot prove the greatness of the great or the beauty of the beautiful. I cannot even prove my own free will."

I imagine, because you are here today, you have, at some point, felt or known something you would describe as faith. For many of us this has looked like having an experience of feeling connected to something bigger; of feeling God's presence with us; of witnessing something that feels like a miracle. Often we experience moments like this in the moments outside the ordinary of our lives, like perhaps when you are swaying to the music of the worship band with 2000 other people in another city. But you might experience it when you are in nature and witness some kind of miracle or beauty that astonishes you. It might be in a moment when you find yourself with more courage than you thought you had, or feel an unexplainable peace and rightness about the world, or when you are surprised by joy, or when your heart leaps with love.

These are the moments our souls bear witness to...these moments which defy description; moments which are not tangible, not provable, not the kind of evidence we are used to examining. In Celtic culture, they are called thin places – places where the separation between heaven and earth is thin enough you get a glimpse of something on the other side.

Other people talk about these as mountaintop experiences. Times when you suddenly have a view of everything in a new and clearer way. These moments give us an assurance of our greater hopes – that there is more to this world than what we can see.

But, the thing about thin places and mountaintops and week-long youth conventions is that we don't get to stay there. Those intense moments of faith, of seeing something greater, of feeling that connection, do not stay the same forever. Our experience of faith ebbs and flows – from mountaintops to valleys, thin places to thick places, once in a lifetime experiences to the ordinary day to day of life. Faith can feel so strong one day singing along with your friends in worship, but the next day or week or month it may be harder to feel that connection. You might even start to have some doubts about what it was you felt. You might even feel like you don't have that faith anymore.

Which is why, if we want to live a life rooted in faith, we will need more than a string of moments. We may not be able to stay on the mountaintop where we so clearly know God's presence, but that doesn't mean we can't do certain things that will help remind us of that knowing or help us feel that knowing again. That's why we show up at worship regularly to hear the scriptures read and the music played and the sermons preached. It's why we come up for communion even when we aren't sure what you think communion really means. It's why we seek out ways to serve others at a food bank or bring someone a meal or reach out to someone in need. It's why we intentionally stay connected to a faith community – other people who also have faith and who sometimes lose faith or doubt faith, but who also have stories like yours about times they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt they believed.

These are some of the ways we practice faith. Because that's what we have to do - practice faith. We have to build habits, cultivate a life of faith, keep an attitude of faith. We try to keep our eyes open, our hearts open, our minds open so that we start to see and feel those thin places more, to see God more.

Consider how author Kathleen Norris describes faith:

“No small part of my religious conversion has been coming to know that faith is best thought of as a verb, not a “thing” that you either have or you don't. I appreciate more the wisdom of novelist Doris Bett's assertion that faith is “not synonymous with certainty...but is the decision to keep your eyes open.” ...Faith is a constant, always there, but surging and ebbing, sometimes strongly evident and at other times barely discernible on my spiritual landscape”

Faith may not be able to be measured at any given time, and “it is difficult to follow God when we are not sure of where God is leading. When we do not see evidence in action, we begin to wonder whether God is watching over us...We can hope, but in faith we often have to trust God and other people with our future and find our assurance outside ourselves.” We practice faith all the time so it isn't just one

mountaintop here and there but a way of life that has room for doubts and struggle or even for the days when we don't see any evidence for it. We practice faith so we build up our trust that God will help us find our way back when we've gotten lost. We practice showing up with an attitude expecting that God will show up. And then, God does. And the more we practice, the better we get at noticing when God shows up and being able to name it and know it.

I hope we will all have all kinds of mountaintop experiences. I hope we all have thin places where the veil between this world and the next falls away a bit. I hope we continue to be surprised by the beauty and majesty and power of the world. I hope we have our breath taken away regularly and feel God's spirit nudge and sometimes push us. I hope we see proof of just how connected we are to each other more and more often. But, when we don't; when we can't; when our doubts mount up or wavers altogether, I hope we'll keep practicing, keep showing up, keep trusting in each other to have faith on our behalf for a while.

Ultimately, I know I can't measure how much any of our faith changed at Triennium. But, we had fun. We laughed. We deepened our sense of community and connection. We felt the Spirit moving around us. We prayed. We sang. We danced. We learned some things and listened to other people's experience of encountering God. We ate together. We took communion. We saw the church, the body of Christ, as something wider and more diverse than we usually see. We hoped God would show up, expected God to show up, and God did. May it be so again and again. Amen.