

“The Victory of Faith”

a sermon by

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Text: “and this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (I John 5:4).

This morning, as we gather for worship, we gather in a world that is very shaken. Four weeks ago Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Yesterday, Hurricane Rita, another storm of great magnitude ripped into the State of Texas, as well as Louisiana, again bringing enormous damage to an area already reeling under the force of a previous storm.

But the devastation that Katrina brought to the Gulf States was not the only destructive aspect of the storm. Coupled with the great human suffering was the great dismay that many people felt about the response to the storm by the Government of the United States, the State of Louisiana, and the City of New Orleans. Many of us watched in disbelief on television as the citizens of New Orleans begged for someone to deliver them from the terrible flooding that was on all sides of them. We watched in horror as thousands of people crowded the Superdome and Convention Center in New Orleans. In the aftermath of these storms we have had to face the terrible questions about the effectiveness of our governmental agencies to provide essential services in the time of disaster.

As one columnist put it, Hurricane Katrina not only ripped the roofs off the buildings in New Orleans, it ripped the roof off the notion that our nation could simultaneously wage a War in Iraq and Afghanistan, grant tax cuts, foolishly continue to refuse to rid ourselves of this deadly dependency on foreign oil, drive our nation into debt, and still deal with the catastrophic mounting of national debt.

In the midst of all of this there is a great uneasiness in our country today as to whether we possess the strength and the will to deal with the incredible challenges that beset us. It is this element of fear and anxiety that reminds all of us that we desperately need the kind of religious life that furnishes us the confidence and hope for victorious living.

Now, the New Testament is certain that it has the key to the secret of that power; and name of the key is faith. "And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith" (I John 5:4). That verse from I John is not isolated and unique. Rather, throughout the Old and New Testament there is a witness to the incredible power of trust in God and Christ to overcome even the most powerful forces in the world.

I.

Faith is one of the most elemental forces in human life. The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church in Corinth, affirms that there are only three forces that abide: faith, hope, and love. Faith, like hope and love, is not easily defined. It is best understood in terms of what it does.

Jesus never defined faith. He did, however, describe its power. He even went on to say that even the smallest amount imaginable (the faith of a mustard seed) could move mountains. And that is what Jesus did. He gathered a small group of common people around him that literally turned the world upside down.

The Apostle Paul never defined faith. He too illustrated it in his life until, as you see him growing from that harshness of a person who was persecuting the church to one who in his later years exhibited a magnificent beauty and grace until he could finally say, "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."

There is only one place in the New Testament that faith is defined. "Faith," writes the author of Hebrews, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." As definitions go, that is a hard one to beat, but even the writer of Hebrews moves quickly from a definition of faith to what faith does in life. "By faith Abraham....by faith Moses.... by faith Joseph." That is the best way to describe faith: in terms of what it does for life. And what it does for life is indispensable.

There are two aspects to every person's life. There is the inner person and the outward circumstances. As the years go by, most of us realize that we have to face some very difficult outer circumstances. But it also becomes clear that if a person is going to face these outer circumstances, he or she will have to develop the inner resources to deal with the outer circumstances. And that is where faith comes into the picture. That is what the writer of I John means when he says, "Faith is the victory that conquers the world."

II.

One of the ways that faith gives us a victory over the world is that it helps unify and centralize our lives around some great devotion. If we genuinely love another person, it is in part because we have faith in that person. If we are willing to commit ourselves to a profession like law, business, medicine or ministry, it is because we have faith in that profession. If a person is willing dedicate his or her life to Jesus Christ, it is because we have faith in Christ.

William Willimon, who for a number of years was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, wrote recently in the *Christian Century* about his experience serving as a Bishop of the United Methodist Church in the State of Alabama. One of the striking changes he observed was the difference between serving as a preacher in a University Church and serving as Bishop of a conference consisting of over six hundred churches. Willimon told of the last sermon he preached at Duke. It was a full house and after the sermon the congregation stood and gave him a standing ovation. After the service a student came to him and said to him, "Dr. Willimon will you be preaching in your new job as Bishop?" Willimon assured this young sophomore that he would probably be preaching two or three times every Sunday. "Good," said the student, "I've heard that your sermons are hard to follow and are poorly organized, so now maybe you will have the time to work on them." Willimon said he was indignant. "Who told you that?" he demanded. "Everybody at Duke," responded the student. Willimon then went on to say that after being stunned by the student's remarks, his next thought was how great it sometimes is to have someone who is actually willing to tell him the truth.

Will Willimon then went on to say that one of the things that he had learned in his first year as a Bishop was that if the mainline churches have a future, it is because of the local church. Most of what I see today at the national level of the Presbyterian Church is not very encouraging. We are divided about the ordination of active homosexuals. We are divided over the war in Iraq. We are divided over the issue of the church's disinvestments of companies doing business with the nation of Israel.

But, I am not discouraged about what I see happening at the local level. One of the privileges given to me as the minister of this church is to witness the enormous amount of energy that goes into the ministry of this church, by members of the congregation. There are over thirty-five outreach ministries in this church that include staffing the largest Loaves and Fishes pantry in the Charlotte area, the Camp Grier program, the Westerly Hills tutorial program, the Urban Ministry, and a host of others as well. That is one of the reasons I encourage you to be generous in your support of the Stewardship efforts of our church. I believe that a gift to the operating budget of First Presbyterian Church can be leveraged in a way that is different from giving to any other charitable organization. Not only is it a gift to Christ and his church, but the many volunteers that serve here allow us to do things that otherwise would be cost prohibitive.

That is why I am encouraged by what I see in the local church today. After all, the Word was made flesh in Bethlehem before it went to Washington, London, or Paris.

III.

Faith does something else as well. It not only unifies our lives, it also releases the inner resources of our lives and opens our lives to God. That is why the real enemy of faith in everyday living is not atheism or doubt. It is fear. Fear imprisons life; faith liberates it. Fear disheartens life; faith encourages it. Fear sickens our lives; faith heals it. Fear is the inner voice inside of us, that when faced with hardship and difficulty, says to us, "You can't." You can't overcome this habit. You can't overcome this addiction. You can't overcome this fear of failure.

Faith is the voice that says to us, "You can." It says to us that we can, not because we are strong, but because we are a child of God and that God will never ask us to do something or bear something that is impossible for us.

That is the kind of faith Jesus spoke about when he said that faith could move mountains. Therefore, if one wanted to, he or she could write another eleventh chapter to the Epistle to the Hebrews. "By faith Copernicus perceived that the earth rotates around the sun and not the sun around the earth. By faith Christopher Columbus reached land by sailing westward though no one would believe him. By faith Martin Luther King, Jr. believed that America could live up to its own creed to provide liberty and justice for all."

That is what we mean when we say that faith not only releases the inner resources within us, but that it also connects us to the power of God within us.

That is the kind of faith one sees throughout the Old and New Testament. It is the kind of faith that allowed the prophet Isaiah to prophesy a word of hope to a people who despaired of any victory. It is the kind of affirmation that allowed the Psalmist to write:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters;
He restores my soul.

On New Year's Eve of 1940, during the darkest days of World War II, the King of England, George VI, spoke to the people of Great Britain words that have great bearing for us, when he quoted from a famous poem.

"I said to the man who stood at the gate of the Year,
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown. He said to me, 'Put your hand in the hand of God. That will be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.'"

Our world, far from having outgrown that kind of stance, desperately needs it now. Faith is not all there is of Christianity, but without it we shall never have the saving hope or the conquering love that Jesus Christ came to give.

Amen!

