

“Keeping the Faith”

sermon by

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Text: “Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

During the time that I was a student at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, there was a tradition at the seminary that generally placed students in a mode of “fear and trembling.” It was called the “Senior Sermon,” and each graduating senior was required to endure it. The “Senior Sermon” was a sermon that each graduate had to preach before the entire Seminary community, including all of the members of the faculty. At the conclusion of the worship sermon each faculty member stood and gave a critique of the sermon. It was brutal! On one occasion a faculty member gave a threefold critique to a student. First, he noted, the sermon was read. Secondly, he observed, it was read poorly. Thirdly, he opined that it probably wasn’t worth reading.

Somewhere along the line the students learned that the faculty was not nearly as interested in criticizing the students as they were arguing with one another. So often students simply remained silent and let the faculty attack one another. In those days, I remember some pretty hotly contested debates. One of them was when the Seminary hired a PhD in Psychology to teach Pastoral Care and Counseling. This was, in those days, a rather new discipline and there were hardliners on the faculty who deeply resented a person whose specialty was not in Biblical Studies or in Theology.

Another hot debate was on the nature of preaching. Dr. Donald Miller was a very respected New Testament scholar who was a strong advocate of ‘expository preaching’, a method by which the preacher selected a passage of Scripture and meticulously explained it on a verse-by-verse basis.

Other professors disagreed. Dr. John Leith, a long time teacher of theology, argued that a sermon didn’t need a specific text, but that it should draw on the wealth of the entire Bible and the history of the theology as well. Dr. Leith noted that he once preached a sermon on the painter Rembrandt. Mercifully, the ‘Senior Sermon’ collided with the ‘age of Aquarius’ and is now a thing of the past.

Looking back over some of the debates, none of them seem quite as important as they did at the time. Dr. Leith once observed to me that it didn’t really matter who won. These were not matters of great substance.

I thought about some of those debates over the past several weeks, particularly as we approached Easter Sunday. Over the last few years there has been a great deal of debate concerning the resurrection. Many contemporary New Testament scholars would side with the Apostle Paul in arguing for the centrality of the “bodily resurrection.” But many others would not. John Dominic Crossan, a prominent Roman Catholic scholar, has argued that he did not believe that any dead body has ever been raised from the dead. He believes that Jesus was buried and that his body rotted like every other dead body. A prominent feminist theologian recently argued that the resurrection was a “myth constructed by males to assuage their fear of death.” She believes that at death our bodies return to the womb of the Goddess Gaia, the earth goddess.

I.

The New Testament lesson from which I read is taken from the book of Jude. I would be surprised if many people here have ever heard a sermon taken from this book. Most people would probably more easily identify the name Jude with a Beatles hit than with a book in the New Testament. In the 156 Sundays of the Common Lectionary the Book of Jude is not included in a single Sunday.

It is not entirely clear for whom the Book of Jude is named. Tradition has it that he is the brother of James, a prominent member of the early Church. That would make Jude, along with James, the brother of Jesus and that would certainly give him a certain amount of credibility in the church.

The Book of Jude consists of a single chapter. There are two things for which it is generally noted. The first is the text for this morning where the author of Jude speaks of “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints”(verse 3). The second noteworthy aspect of the book of Jude is the beautiful benediction that occurs in verse 24-25:

**“Now to him who is able to keep you from falling,
and to make you stand without blemish in the presence
of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty,
power, and authority, before all time and now and
forever. Amen.”**

II.

It is to this enigmatic expression in verse three to which I call your attention this morning. One of the problems that the author of this book is contending against is a group of “false teachers” in the church. This is the context that allows the writer of Jude speaks of the “faith once for all entrusted to the saints.”

The word “faith” is used in a number of different ways in the New Testament. Jesus spoke of “faith” in terms of confidence in the fact that God would provide for us (Matthew 6:25-34). The Apostle Paul used the word “faith” as our trust in God’s righteousness (Romans 3: 21-31). The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews speak of faith as “the assurance of things hoped for and the confidence in things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). In the Book of Jude faith is seen as an objective reality. It is a definite body of truth that has been given to the church and for which the church must contend. It is this notion of faith that I wish to explore today.

III.

Part of what we mean by the faith of the church is that the church has received a revelation of God in Jesus Christ and in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. This morning we have recognized a group of children who have worked to memorize part of the Children’s Catechism. In doing so we intentionally teach the language of the faith.

Several years ago our church adopted a “Children’s Primer,” which included a series of things that our children would commit to memory. This included the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, certain parables of Jesus and other selections of Scripture. These passages of Scripture and these creeds are a part of what we understand as the “faith once for all entrusted to the saints.”

The same is true of hymns as well. Although the choir and Bob Ivey in particular, sometimes chafe at the repetition of hymns sung in worship, nevertheless part of what I do as the minister of the church is to try to ensure that the congregation knows and can sing with confidence the great hymns of the church. These would include, though not be limited to, such hymns as “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” “How Firm a Foundation,” “God of Grace and God of Glory,” “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,” “The Lord’s My Shepherd, I’ll Not Want”. These hymns are a part of the great heritage of the church. They, along with the musical works of the great composers Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Handel and others, form a musical repository that is a treasure store by which the church lives.

IV.

If it is true that part of the mission of the church is the preservation of the truth that has been entrusted to it from generation to generation, then it immediately raises the question of what about other faith communities and the other great religions of the world.

Allen Bloom in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, observed that as a professor at the University of Chicago, most of the freshman that entered the University did so with two strong convictions. The first was the belief that all truth was relative to culture. The second was that morality was a matter of personal preference. This notion of the relativism of truth and morality is a notion that is not only prominent among college students; it is common among adults today. There is a generally held notion in our society today that all religions lead to the same path and that all religions are basically the same. Many people today ascribe to the notion that Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, and Confucius are all great religious figures that taught the same message.

One of the great challenges that the church in our day faces is understanding and living the faith that we profess. As Christians, we do not believe that Jesus is simply one revelation among others. The clear witness of the New Testament is that Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God. He is the light of the world and every other light pales in the shadow of that light.

Having said this, we also acknowledge that we are living today in a pluralistic society. Thirty years ago the city of Charlotte was an overwhelming Protestant community. Today Protestants are a minority community. Over the past several decades there has been an enormous increase in our community of Roman Catholics due in part to a large number of people moving here from the Northeast and a large population of Latinos from Mexico and other Spanish speaking countries. There are now three mosques in Charlotte and most of the other major religions of the world are represented within our city.

That means, of course, that we must not only live in midst of other faiths but, that we must respect other faiths as well. In an “Age of Terrorism” it is important that Christians, Jews, and Muslims are able to live together, work together, and to understand and respect one another’s traditions and faith.

V.

Then, finally, if we are to be serious about the “faith once delivered to the saints” we must recover the notion of the Christian home as a necessary part of the faith of the church. In recent years there have been numerous attempts to recruit ministers in the same fashion that one might recruit investment bankers or other professionals. In my experience most good ministers are the product of strong Christian homes. John Calvin understood the value of the home. He also understood the Christian life in terms of the worship of God on Sunday, the keeping of the Lord’s Day holy, daily Bible reading, daily prayer, table blessing and the stewardship of money and time.

My father once told me that when he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in Knoxville Presbytery, the minister who examined him in the area of theology asked him only one question. He asked my father if he had been raised in the home of my great Uncle, Dr. James L. Fowle. When my father answered that he had, the minister moved that the examination be sustained.

In this day of standardized ordination exams it is not very likely that such an examination would be possible. But it does remind us of the importance of the home. It is the primary place where faith is taught by word and by example and it is one of the most important places where the faith is entrusted once for all to all the saints.

Amen!