

Sermon for Sunday, August 7, 2016

WHAT'S YOUR HUB?

Isaiah 1:10-20 / Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

As many of you know, I love riding my bike. But many of you may not know why I ride.... I ride for many reasons. I ride because I cannot run anymore. That's what I get for playing soccer for too many years. Now my knees talk back to me when I abuse them. So I ride because it's a non-loadbearing and great cardio exercise. I also ride because it is good for the environment. Most of all, I ride because it makes me feel like a little kid again. I used to take my bike everywhere as a boy—to school, playing in the woods, getting into town. Riding my bike gave me the mobility and freedom to go wherever I wanted to go, whenever I wanted to.

However the bike, or bikes, I have now are a far cry from my heavy clunker of yesteryear. All carbon frames, decked out with fancy shifters and drive trains, they feel more like race cars than utility vehicles. One of the most important parts on any bike, though, are not the shiny things, but the hubs ... those little devices at the center of each wheel that hold the spokes together, connect them to the rims, and engage the wheels when I step on the pedals. The hubs make the wheels turn, go forward and hold their speed. The better the hub, the more efficient the ride. Or, in other words, without the hubs, the whole bike simply won't go anywhere.

Now, I am pretty sure that the Preacher who addressed the faithful in the book of Hebrews was no cyclist, but he or she knew all about the importance of that which holds our lives together, that which engages us and makes us move forward. The "hub" of our life of faith, the Preacher tells his or her congregation, is "the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

This is important to remember because it is so easy to forget. The Preacher knows this, so she launches into a long litany of an all-star cast of God's faithful: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah. As it turns out, they all have the following key features in common: they obeyed God's call without knowing what they would be asked to do when they said "yes" to a life with God. They all "died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on earth, for people speaking in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland." And finally, they do not look back because "they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one."

I think we would do well to listen to this ancient sermon over and over again. Especially in today's world. But then again, perhaps the Preacher's world and ours are not that different. People, you and I, want to receive the promises made to us, and we want them right now. We are accustomed to having things our way. Only seeing what we envision for our lives from a distance doesn't really satisfy us. We also don't necessarily see ourselves as strangers and foreigners on earth. Strangers and foreigners—that's usually others, not us. Yet, the Preacher reminds his audience, and us, that that's exactly who each and every one of us is: we are all lost, wandering in the wilderness in search of a homeland. And finally, regardless how great one's country is, or how great we might think

it is, the Preacher says that wherever on this earth we may live pales in comparison with the “better country, that is the heavenly one.”

At first, listening to this Preacher is very disconcerting, to say the least. Not only because what he has to say is so counter-intuitive compared with the way most of us live our lives. But mostly, because these great champions of God “died in faith without having received God’s promises.” Since this is obviously the case, it has been easy throughout history for Pied Pipers to seize the opportunity to promise to deliver what God seemingly cannot, or has not. The classic example for this is Moses. When he goes up the mountain to meet God and does not immediately return, the people lose their nerve. Instead of waiting for Moses, and for God’s word of promise, they build a golden calf. I wonder, is today such a time? Are we waiting for deliverance? Are we ready to follow anybody who promises us what we want to hear because, we, too, are losing our nerve? Are we getting ready to build our own golden calf because we are tired of waiting for God to show up?

Sometimes, I wonder whether the answers to these question lie in our city planning. Both in the ancient world, in the Middle East, and in the old world, in Europe, cities were planned around a sacred center, a sacred hub, if you will. The Greek and the Roman city were constructed around a temple. The European city was built around a church. It was an acknowledgment that human beings need such a center as a reminder that our lives are never entirely under our own control. From that center, life emanated as it was arranged in concentric circles. However, when we look at our contemporary cities, when we look around St. Louis, I think we would be hard pressed to find our city’s sacred center. There are many centers, both sacred and secular, and they are all competing with one another. Pulling in different directions, I don’t see a hub that connects everything and helps us move forward. And the same holds true for Houston, Atlanta, Chicago, L.A., San Francisco, New York, Boston ... you fill in the blank. Perhaps this is also true for us as a nation. Maybe it is even true for our own lives. We are in search of a sacred center, but we cannot seem to locate it

So, what is our hub? What is our sacred center that connects us to the core reality of our lives? What keeps us from building our own golden calves and following anybody who promises us the world we want so desperately? And is the world we want the same thing as the one we need? The most important thing to remember about that search, about our faith, as the Preacher would tell us, is that none of the “shiny” things we crave can hold as a sacred center. What holds us together and moves us forward into the future is a simple table with a simple meal: bread and wine. The table to which our Lord invites us, where all, *all*, are welcome, and where our differences do not matter anymore. Right here is the hub of the Christian life. It’s a foretaste of things to come. It’s a visible reminder of the heavenly banquet in the heavenly city that has foundations which can never be shaken, and whose architect and builder is God. That, and nothing else, is the promise which gives our lives its sacred center and helps us look and move forward into the future. May it be so.

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