

FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

I have given the lesson for this hour the title, Faith of Our Fathers, which of course, is the title to one of the great hymns of the Christian faith. I want to read the words to that hymn as we begin this morning:

Faith of our fathers, living still
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword,
O how our hearts beat high with joy
Whene'er we hear that glorious word!
Faith of our fathers! holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death!

Faith of our fathers, we will strive
To win all nations unto thee;
And through the truth that comes from God
Mankind shall then indeed be free.
Faith of our fathers! holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death!

Our fathers, chained in prisons dark,
Were still in heart and conscience free;
And blest would be their children's fate,
If they, like them should die for thee:
Faith of our fathers! holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death!

Faith of our fathers, we will love
Both friend and foe in all our strife,
And preach thee, too, as love knows how
By kindly words and virtuous life.
Faith of our fathers! holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death!

What many people may not know is that those words were written by a man named Frederick Faber, who was a Catholic living in England during the time of Henry VIII, who began the Church of England and at the same time, a widespread persecution of Catholics. That song, of course, is one that seeks to honor the faith of all those men who remained stalwart, even to the point of imprisonment and death in their efforts to hold on to the Catholic faith. Perhaps we should also point out that the same kind of persecution was being waged against the so-called protestants and critics of the Pope in nations that were predominantly Catholic.

When I hear or sing that hymn, however, my mind and heart does not go to the men and women of the period of the reformation. Instead, I am drawn in spirit to an earlier time, when men did not suffer persecution for a particular version of the Christian faith, but for the faith itself. I think of a Christian living around the end of the first century, a man named Ignatius. Ignatius was born around 35 A.D. He died in 108 A.D. during the infamous persecution ignited against Christians by the Emperor Trajan. Ignatius was a contemporary of the apostle John, and had become an elder of the church in Antioch. That was Antioch, not of Syria, but of Asia Minor, mentioned in Acts 13 and 14, as well as in 2 Timothy 3:11, where Paul wrote that he had suffered great persecution and suffering. It was not far from Ephesus, which is probably where the connection between him and the apostle John was established. At any rate, Ignatius was arrested by the Roman authorities, and condemned to die in the Coliseum at Rome. As he stood there in that Coliseum, and the gate to the lion cages was opened, history tells us that Ignatius pointed at the leading lion coming towards him, and said, "Today, I begin to be a Christian!"

We could, of course, think of other great martyrs of the faith, men like Paul and Peter, John, and James. I am particularly drawn to Paul, who suffered an incredible amount during his lifetime of service to Christ. For a long time he languished in the Mamertine prison in Rome. He had been there before, but as time went on, he found himself drawing closer to what he knew would be his death, probably by beheading. At least that is what tradition tells us. Even so, knowing that, Paul would write these words which we have preserved for us in the book of **2 Timothy, chapter 4, beginning in verse 5:**

5) As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. 6) For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8) Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

He then went on to say—**beginning in verse 16:**

16) At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! 17) But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. 18) The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

How deeply indebted we truly are to men of faith like that! And yet, this morning, as I think about “Faith of our Fathers,” I cannot help but also think about the faith of OUR FATHERS. Today is Father’s Day and this is the day when we seek to honor our dads. Many of those dads are now gone, and so what we have are only memories. Just a few weeks ago, we celebrated Memorial Day, in which we remembered all of those men, many of whom were fathers, who gave up their life for this nation.

Some of you may still be blessed to have their fathers with you and I hope you are taking advantage of this day, and every day to appreciate your father, not just for being part of the reason for your being here, but for all of the ways that he provided for you, made sacrifices for you, and in so many ways, gave up his life for you.

But this morning, I want to think with you for a little while about “the faith of our fathers.”

Unfortunately, many children, and maybe some of you were among them, grew up in homes where the father did not profess or show much faith. Maybe he wasn’t an unbeliever, but for some reason, the Christian faith was not something that was a priority to him. Maybe it was his work, or maybe it was his own childhood training, but for some reason, it never seemed to be a priority to him to seek God and live a dedicated Christian life. That doesn’t mean that they were “bad dads” it just means they didn’t have much faith to pass on to their children.

And then there are some fathers who actually rejected the faith. Maybe they were brought up in a home where God's word was revered, and God was worshipped. Maybe they were encouraged to read and pray and go to worship, but for some reason they ended up turning away from the faith, and became a critic of the church and the Christian faith. They may still have been loving fathers, good fathers, good men, but they did not have any faith to pass on to their family.

Fortunately for many families, there have been fathers who recognized the need for God in their life and in his marriage and family. He realized that he needed the help that the Word of God gives and the assistance of other Christians in the lives of his family. He may or may not have been a leader in the church, but his faith was as real as it was simple. He believed and he did his best to be a good Christian man. His prayers were simple affairs, often the same, but he prayed in the full trust that there is a heavenly Father who hears the prayers of his children.

Do you see what I am getting at? When we speak about the faith of our fathers, I realize that not everyone's father had the same faith. Just as everyone's father did not have the same start in life, the same education, the same experiences, the same opportunities; not all had the same faith either.

Now, from this point on in the lesson, my remarks are going to be directed primarily to the men among us this morning. Most, if not all of you are fathers, or at least hope to be some day. I want to talk with you about your faith, the faith you will be passing on to your family. And I do that knowing that it is never too late to humble yourself and make whatever changes are necessary for you to become the father whose faith your family will remember for the rest of their lives.

Let me give you what I believe are four essential things in order for you to become that man of faith that hopefully you want to be.

Number one, humility. Maybe you already have this, and if so, that is good, you are off to a good start. But don't rush by this point too quickly. It actually is the foundation upon which a life of faith is built securely. And it isn't something natural for us. Most men are brought up in a culture of competition. We compete in races, contests, in education, at work, and even in our lifestyle. We want to succeed. We want to win. We want to be number one. We work hard at making a life for ourselves and our families, and for the most part, probably do a good job at that. And that is where the problem may come. We begin to feel, and think, and maybe even talk as if we are the know-all, do-all, and we are not.

Christ spoke about dying to ourselves, and that is not easy to do, especially when you have spent a lifetime becoming someone, or something special, at least in your own eyes. Sometimes we do not want our families especially, to think that there is anything we do not know, or cannot do. But come on! How realistic is that? Are you really superman?

In **Matthew 5:3**, Jesus laid it down almost as the first essential in becoming one of His disciples: He said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" Listen to rest of the things he went on to say, and ask yourselves men, "How am I doing on that?"

4) "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5) "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. 6) "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7) "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8) "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9) "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

The sooner we men can come to the realization that we are not little gods, that we do not know everything, cannot do everything, and that we have a lot of shortcomings and room for improvement, the better off we will be and the better off our family and those around us will be.

Number two, knowledge. Knowledge is the key. Information leads to transformation. "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*" (Romans 10:17). "*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*" (2 Timothy 2:15). Most men pride themselves on being good at something. There is something they can do and do it well. They excel at it, and there is no reason why having a good, working knowledge of God's word can't be one of those things.

Number three, clear vision. You need to have a clear understanding and appreciation for what is important, what is eternal, what is godly. As Paul writes in Romans 12:2, do not make the mistake of letting the world tell you what your priorities and values ought to be. Listen to God, and live your life by a clear discernment of godly principles. You need God's perspective on things. You do not have to be a prophet to be able to look into the future and see where your beliefs, attitudes and practices are going to lead, or that of your children and family. You have to be guided in your life by an over-arching vision or philosophy that will enable you to safely navigate all of the dangers of marriage, parenting, and all of life. Keep in mind, so much of what happens to you and your family depend on how well you understand these things; what happens to them in this life, or the next!

Finally, number four, keep on, keepin' on. Don't be a quitter. Quitters never win. Don't quit your marriage, don't quit your family, don't quit your faith and don't quit your integrity. How many lives have been lost, how many souls have been shipwrecked, all because someone took their eyes off of the ball; they lost sight of what they were doing, and why. It is easy to become distracted, and let that which is important to your faith slip into the background, until one day you find your faith is not nearly as strong as it was at one time. I think about how many Christians I have known over the years who are no longer around. That is, they are still alive, but they no longer have any meaningful relationship with God; no longer faithful members of the church, no longer involved and supporting of what the church is doing. They may say that

they still believe in God, but the truth is, their faith has failed them. What will they pass on to their children?

Faith of our Fathers. Fathers, let's take a serious look at our faith, and if it isn't what it ought to be, let's do something about it. And let's not wait, or put it off until this idea is forgotten. Let's decide today—on Father's Day—that the faith of this father is going to be everything it can possibly be.