

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church  
Durham, NC  
10:55 a.m. Sunday, May 22, 2005

"Powered by Faith"

a sermon by Rev. Jim Bell

Text: Hebrews 11:1-12    John 20:19-31    NRSV

Opening prayer:    O God, who has loved us through your Son, Jesus Christ, open our hearts to your message of faith in Christ's power. Amen.

Today's trivia question is: Does anybody know the first book in the New Testament to be written? It wasn't Matthew. It was the apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. This letter was written about 50 A.D.

The church at Thessalonica had become a model to all of the Christians in the region. The Thessalonians' faith in God had become known everywhere. Paul describes the impact of the church when he writes, "They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." If this church existed today, it would be written up in every Christian periodical and shown on every Christian network.

In the first few verses of this letter, Paul writes, "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1:2-3) Here Paul gives us an inside look into the hearts of the Thessalonian Christians. They were a church that would be best described as having a work produced by faith, a labor prompted by love, and a steadfastness inspired by hope

in Jesus Christ.

This was a church that was ignited by faith, hope and love. These essential ingredients are at the heart of the renewal of the church today. We will be studying faith, hope and love for the next three Sundays. Today we focus on faith.

Powered by faith, the Church becomes an unstoppable force in mission for Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls us to live by faith. What does it really mean to live by faith? The response of faith is nothing more than obedience. Faith begins with God speaking and materializes when we respond.

The starting point of living by faith is recognizing that God has revealed so much of his will that we have plenty to live by without ever hearing another word. Some things we simply don't need to pray about. A church doesn't need to pray about whether it should pray. We don't need to pray about whether we should serve. We don't need to pray about whether we should reach out. We don't need to pray about whether we should give. God has already commanded us to do those things. The response of faith is to obey God.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews describes faith this way: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . Without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists." (Hebrews 11:1, 6)

Faith is trusting what we cannot see. On the evening of the first Easter, Jesus' disciples were gathered together in a locked room. They were hiding for fear of the Jews. The risen Christ appeared to them. Jesus was alive! What an incredible experience! One of the disciples named Thomas was not with them when Jesus came. The others told Thomas about it. Thomas couldn't believe it. It was too good to be true.

Thomas said, "Unless I see with my own eyes the nail prints in his hands and put my hand in the wound in his side, I will not believe."

One week later the disciples were again gathered together. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus told Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus replied, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:24-29) Faith is believing where we cannot see.

Erwin McManus was the pastor of a small congregation, Cornerstone Church, in south Dallas, Texas. It was a small group that met in a house. God blessed their work, and they saw individuals and families come to faith in Jesus Christ.

One day they saw an acre of land for sale on Ervay Street. Though the congregation was still less than 50 adults, many of whom were on welfare, they began to talk and pray about purchasing that property. It seemed strange that an acre of land, so close to downtown Dallas, had remained undeveloped while everything around it was built up. Erwin never stopped to reflect on why this property hadn't been developed.

He went to the local Association of Churches and asked the director of missions if they would consider financially undergirding their efforts. At first there was little response. South Dallas was not a target community for new growth. It was poor. It was dangerous. It was a transitional community. It was a product of white flight. In Erwin's appeal to the director, he even mentioned that it was unlikely they would succeed. If that were the case, the property would be available for resale.

They ended up buying the land. A gracious church in north Dallas got involved, which allowed the association to partner with them and purchase the property. They put all the money up front.

The church began the process of obtaining building permits, but a strange thing happened on the way to fulfilling their dream. The city of Dallas had tagged the property “unbuildable.” It had been a landfill. It was worthless. They had bought an acre of garbage. Several core samples were taken. They went at least 25 feet deep and found nothing but trash. It finally made sense. This was the reason the land had remained undeveloped. You couldn’t build on it.

Erwin was overwhelmed with despair. He was ashamed and humiliated and wondered why God would let this happen. His reputation and his own sense of self-respect were ruined. He had been convinced that this property would provide the ministry Jesus longed to do in that needful community.

All he could do was ask his congregation to pray with him to believe that God was with them and that he would use even the worst of human mistakes to perform the greatest of miracles. For months and months and months they prayed. The longer they prayed, the more foolish their request seemed. They asked God to turn the landfill into a land filled with his people.

A pastor, his wife and some of their youth group visited the church from out of town to help on a mission project. They were all sitting around a little table in the house where Cornerstone met. It didn’t take long before the question Erwin dreaded to hear was asked again, “What are you going to do with the landfill?”

A woman from the church named Delores Rube replied, “It is taken care of. We’ve prayed and asked God to turn it into soil.” There was a rush inside of Erwin. It seemed as if God was confirming her words and telling him that he wasn’t finished yet. He went back to the association and asked them to take another core sample. Their response was hostile. But, for whatever reason, they decided to take the sample. This time, they found soil.

I know what you're thinking -- no way! How did this happen? Was it because the core sample was in a different part of the land? Could it be that God actually performed a miracle and changed the landfill to good land?

This is what we know: The same realtor who sold the property to the church came back and offered them three times the amount he had sold it for once he heard the clearance to build had actually come through. The previous owners could not build on the property, but the church could. They were told the property was worthless and unusable.

We don't know what exactly happened beneath the ground at 2815 South Ervay Street. We do know that God took Erwin's failure and performed a miracle. Today Cornerstone Church worships on that acre of land. Faith made the difference.

Powered by faith, the Church becomes an unstoppable force in mission for Jesus Christ. Today I invite you to live by faith – to believe where you cannot see. God wants to do great things through you. God wants to do great things through these students who are preparing to graduate. God wants to do great things through me. God wants to do great things through Duke Memorial United Methodist Church. For that to happen, we have to trust God. We have to obey. We have to live by faith. Let's do it.

Closing prayer: O God, we believe. Help our unbelief. We trust in you. Help us to trust where we cannot see. Help us to obey. Help our church to honor you as we seek to fulfill your mission in Durham. Make us an unstoppable force for you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.