

Living into the Questions: Success or Faithfulness?
Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-12, 23-28, 32-40;12:1-2
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First Baptist, Pottstown
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We are asking ourselves questions! Questions we hope will help us uncover God's path for our future. Usually when we ask questions, we do so because we assume there is an answer. Generally, we don't want just *any* answer, we want the "right" answer. So, when I say we are endeavoring to discover the will and way of God for us as a community of faith, you might be tempted to ask, "how will we know it when we see it? What's the "right" answer? How will we recognize God's call? How will we know we are successful?"

While there are many ways to determine an individual or group's success at something, it's clear that our culture has placed higher value on certain outcomes. Wealth, fame and measurable effectiveness are some ways we judge and value "success". In light of the mid-term elections, we might consider winning a determinant of success. For some, it's the size of one's "following", scored by the number of "likes" and "retweets" from social media pages. We could offer data like return on investments, numbers of participants, lives saved, crisis averted as measures of success. I remember being a new pastor and going to regional meetings where I was, at the time, the only woman in the room. Overhearing my male colleagues one-up-ing each other for Jesus, they touted the number of baptisms they'd performed and how many members they'd taken in. It was clear that their sense of effectiveness and self-worth was tied up in this competition. That was more than 30 years ago but things haven't changed; we still measure churches' success by the number of folks on the rolls, how much money's in the bank and how high the steeple is on the corner...hmmm...what does that mean for us?!

One of the keys to getting the “right” answer is to ask the right question! Our western mindset teaches us to think in binary’s: if we are not good, we must be bad. If we aren’t rich, we’re poor and if we are not a “success” then we certainly must be a failure! Measured against the cultural standard of success, then I am afraid I come up short in most categories, as maybe does our church. But what if the cultural standard *isn’t* the right measurement? What if the question of whether one is a success or a failure is flawed from the start? What if we move beyond the binary to take a fresh look at what it means to experience success? What if, instead of asking whether we are a success or failure we asked: are we faithful?

The text today measures the success of a pretty outstanding list of spiritual forbearers. It’s a who’s who in the Hebrew Bible, the head table at the ultimate banquet, a roll call of those who heard God’s invitation to follow and endured the obstacles that invitation thrust upon them. It’s not a complete list, by any means; except for a “tip of the hat” to Sarah, and a one-line mention of Ra’hab, it’s all men. But what’s impressive to me is that not a single one of these listed here would be considered a “success”, in their time or in ours! And yet their actions and memory are preserved and extolled; why? Because they were faithful.

Success is all about personal or corporate achievement. Look at these names! What does any one of them have to show for themselves? Abel made the better sacrifice and it got him killed! Abraham and Sarah leave their land and home in response to God’s direction to go to a promised land they never entered. Moses is raised in the Pharaohs’ household but “outs” himself to lead the Hebrews only to wander in the dessert with a bunch of unruly and ungrateful people. And then the prophets and the list of injustices they endured: tortured, mocked, enchained, flogged, stoned to death, killed by the sword, sawn in two! Verse 39 sums it up: “Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did **not receive** what was promised...” They were **not**

successful... And yet here they are: our forbearers in faith, acclaimed by the author of Hebrews, and “provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect” by God.

If success is measured in wealth and fame and influence, how do we measure faithfulness? What does it mean to be faithful like these women and men were faithful? What does it take to be “made perfect” by God?

When we look at their stories and remember their individual characters we might wonder how they ever were considered worthy to be called by God at all. The “father and mother of a multitude of nations” couldn’t have children; the man called to confront the Pharaoh couldn’t speak. Jacob gets the blessing because he cheats Esau. And it’s Ra’hab, the *prostitute*, who saves the day. None of these folks would make the list of successful *anything* today but here they are! A “great crowd of witnesses” brought forward from the Hebrew Bible to life again in the New Testament in order to encourage us on the journey: to light the path, to show the way, to remind us that we are not called to be successful but to be faithful to the God who calls us to bring to life God’s reign.

The writer begins this section by reminding us that “faith is the assurance of things hope for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.” “Faith”, not success. It is “complete trust” that we are called to, not personal or even communal bragging rights. It’s the “firm belief in something for which there is no proof” which God rewards, not the number of folks in the pews or the amount of money in the bank. There are no special brownie points for doing the obvious but God *promises* that if we risk, if we dare, if we step up or step out, we will *have what we need* and *find what we are looking for*. “Faith is the **assurance** of things hoped for,” the writer says. While success may look like money and possessions and

notoriety, it's pretty clear that faith looks like risk-taking and sacrifice and challenge and suffering. Perhaps that's not much of a comparison by any culture's standards but clearly it is the invitation to us.

So, here's another question: **what does it look like to be faithful in this place?** In this season, when all the cultural measures of success might indicate anything but, what does it *look like* to envision a promised land that not all of us might arrive at? What does it *feel like* to carry within us the potential for new life after a long season of barrenness? What does it *sound like* to hear the invitation to respond when it means entering into the suffering and oppression of others when we could easily side step it ourselves? What does it *do to us* to come alongside others in solidarity which will cost us? What does it mean to *join those* who "through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, and won strength out of weakness?"

What does it mean to be faithful, like they were faithful? What does it mean to be faithful, in *this* time, in *this* place?

We are living into the questions, important questions, God's questions, and its faithfulness that will bring the answers. Faithfulness that dares to see; faithfulness that dares to risk, faithfulness that dares to dream, faithfulness that dares to believe when there seemingly is no basis for doing so.

Success as the world sees it, is not our measurement. Our call is to faithfulness and our measure is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us," says Hebrews, "looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding it's shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." By the world's standards, there was no

bigger failure than this: that ordinary humans could kill the Son of God. By God's standards there is no truer example of faith: that one could be willing to lose one's life for the life of others for no other reason than Love.

Success or faithfulness? Which will you choose? What will it look like? When will you begin?