

**“Teaching Horticulture to Martians”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

25 September 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 17:1-10

*“So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”*

~ Luke 17:10

**Prayer**

**Holy God,**

**We are gathered here because we believe**

**And also to be helped with our unbelief.**

**Startle us with the transformative power of your word**

**That in listening to the Gospel,**

**We may worship you more fully**

**And serve you more faithfully. Amen.**

Last month, my mother and I went on a sort of genealogical journey together. We met up in Rio de Janeiro and, after spending a few days in the city, we drove 2 hours to a quaint town of 5,000 people that is hugged by green mountains, steeped in history and known for its unique cultural traditions. It was there, in the tiny town of Conservatória where my mother’s Portuguese grandfather settled down as an immigrant in the late 1800’s, got married, raised 6 children and lived the rest of his life even though, by the time of his death at 86, he had made enough money to give him a comfortable life back in the old-country.

After my great-grandfather’s passing, my grandfather and his siblings drifted apart. My mother lost contact with her uncles, aunt and cousins. And my brother and I never got to meet that whole side of our extended family. Earlier this year, an upwelling of interest in our ancestral roots and social media motivated my younger brother to search for and contact our relatives who still live in and around Conservatória. Our great-grandfather’s life story drew us all back together. For a couple of days, I hung around people I had never seen until last August who knew stories about my family history I was eager and thrilled to hear and learn. Our reunion was awkward, stimulating, lively, gleeful, enlightening and exhausting all at the same time. We were all making an effort to get to know each other so it was to be expected that people would ask lots of polite questions to try to fill in the lacunae created by the decades-long hiatus that had kept us unaware of each other’s life trajectories.

I knew that it was only a matter of time before someone asked about my family or what I do for a living, but much to my surprise, the first question directed at me was about my college education and academic background. I was relieved to have an easy question with a simple answer. I happily said that I went to Pharmacy School in Rio and have two master's degrees in theology. The uncomfortable silence that descended on the living room following my response was hard to ignore. Thankfully, one kind soul who still had a confused look in her face rushed to move the conversation along. She asked, "**Did you say – theology?**" I nodded my head affirmatively. Still mystified, she pressed on, "**Theology, huh?... But what do you do with theology?**"

My relatives' reaction to a word that is hardly used or heard outside religious and, I would say, mostly Christian circles instigated me to approach the disciples' earnest request for more faith in today's Gospel lesson from a completely different standpoint. I spent a good chunk of last week asking myself, wrestling with, and mulling over two very basic questions:

- 1 – What is faith? And...
- 2 – What do we do with faith?

Over the last 2,000 years, as you can imagine, much ink has been spilled by theologians from every Christian tradition and confession on the best and most biblical definition of "faith." John Calvin, the French Reformer of the 16<sup>th</sup> century whose principles and ideas still sustain the Reformed theology of the United Church of Christ, wrote in "*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*," that faith is "**a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.**"<sup>i</sup> Calvin guessed correctly that people would misinterpret his association of the word "faith" with "knowledge" and mistakenly think of "faith" as some kind of religious power booster that gives Christians an increased spiritual capacity to fully understand the mystery of God. The Reformer quickly dismissed that theological trap by saying in "*The Institutes*" that, "**the knowledge of faith** [he was talking about] **consists in assurance rather than in comprehension.**"<sup>ii</sup> Still, if we polled the people who come to worship on Sunday morning for a definition of faith, it is very likely that the results might show a tendency to speak about faith as something very private and personal, some inner power, each person must experience and have to know God more intimately and be saved. Many would undoubtedly describe faith as an antidote to doubt. A few would probably say that faith is the religious walker we all need to keep us steady as we limp slowly toward a greater understanding of God despite the disbelief that handicaps us. There are others who would talk about faith as the spiritual gift that rewires our brains to make it possible for Christians to believe in the unprovable – the Trinity, the virgin birth, the resurrection – and to do the impossible – tell a mulberry tree to put down roots in the sea.

Our Holy Scriptures asserts that "**without faith it is impossible to please God,**"<sup>iii</sup> but the Bible does not really say what faith is, except in the Book of Hebrews where the

writer took a stab at it and, while employing sophisticated and elegant theological concepts, defined faith in only a few words. ***“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”***<sup>iv</sup> A quote attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. translates this lofty New Testament decoding of faith into plain, simple, and graspable language, ***“Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”***<sup>v</sup> In other words, faith is the foundation, the grounding, the oxygen, the animating force, the heartbeat of courageous and hopeful Christian living. That’s what faith does. Faith wraps our lives in hope.

The Black social activist and philosopher Cornel West once noted that people of faith are ***“prisoners of hope,”***<sup>vi</sup> because our faith fills our hearts with an unfading hope for a world that isn’t but can still be. It is faith that won’t let us give up on the hope for a world where justice carries the day and peace finally comes out ahead and solidarity gains over indifference, where human beings ***“take hold of the life that is true life.”*** Our faith stokes the defiant hope in our hearts that insists on whispering into our ears that humankind has been created for something better than greed or the love of money or racism or Christian nationalism or political polarization between the Left and Right or ***“harmful and senseless desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”*** Christians keep investing our time and resources into every possibility to mend our fractured world because faith nurtures our hope in the goodness of God despite all the wrong, the violence, hatred and evil we see around us. We are prisoners of hope, you and I, because the faith that wells up from the teachings of Christ gives us the strength to look at all the evidence of what is broken, flawed, wrong and sinful in our lives, in the Church and in the world and still choose to hold on to the hope for forgiveness, for personal, ecclesial and global salvation, for second chances to do the right thing and pursue love, gentleness, godliness, and faith.

This idea that Christian hope is not constrained by the reality of human history, but is rooted in faith inspired Frederick Buechner, one of the greatest men of faith, preachers, writers and storytellers of the Church in America, who died last month, to define “faith” as ***“the eye of the heart.”*** Buechner said, ***“Faith is a way of looking at what there is to be seen in the world and in ourselves and hoping, trusting, believing against all evidence to the contrary that beneath the surface we see there is vastly more that we cannot see... Faith is the eye of the heart, and by faith we see deep down beneath the face of things – by faith we struggle against all odds to be able to see – that the world is God’s creation even so. It is he who made us and not we ourselves, made us out of his peace to live in peace, out of his light to dwell in light, out of his love to be above all things loved and loving. That is the last truth about the world.”***<sup>vii</sup>

My own understanding of faith has evolved since I joined the small and vibrant Presbyterian Church in Brazil at the age of 15. I’ve come to believe that faith, this divine substance of the hope that gives us a whole new way of looking at the world, is a decision. The original meaning of the verb “to decide” in Latin is to cut off all the other alternative possibilities in order to focus on what is most important. I believe faith is a decision we make every second, every minute, every hour and every day to take a stand alongside the

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Gospel of Jesus Christ on what matters for the salvation of humanity and the redemption of our world. In fact, I believe you sacrificed all the other ways in which you could have spent your time this morning; you willingly gave up on other plans, other tasks, other activities and other priorities because you believe that this gathering of prisoners of hope is where you practice how to live into the hope of the Gospel. You made a decision to show up in worship because you understand the importance of this sacred time to make your faith stronger and your hope more robust. We are not here to merely pray “**Lord, increase our faith!**” We decided to be here this morning because we know that faith always precedes hope and without constant nourishment and exercise faith begins to falter and Christian hope devolves into an insipid optimistic belief that things will turn out well somehow even though no one really believes the evidence on the ground can be changed.

Jim Wallis, the founding Director of the Georgetown University Center on Faith and Justice, wrote in his book “*Faith Works*,” that “***in the Bible, faith is not something you possess but rather something you practice. You have to put it into action or it really doesn’t mean anything.***”<sup>viii</sup>

This is the lesson Jesus hoped his first disciples would learn and pass on to the whole community of Jesus-followers. They did not need more faith or a bigger faith; all they needed was to make a decision to put the faith they already had into practice because even the smallest amount of faith holds great hope for the transformation of the world and can initiate real-life changes beyond anyone’s imagination.

Last week, after I looked over the new report released by the Pew Research Center regarding the future of Christianity in America, I wondered if somehow we, the “prisoners of hope,” that still make the decision to gather as the Church of Jesus Christ have failed to live into our hope and, for that reason, our faith lost its meaning for hundreds of young people who were raised in the church.<sup>ix</sup> Pew Researchers projected four possible religious futures for the United States and, in all of them, by 2070 Christianity will be a minority religion in a country with a significant majority of young people without any religious affiliation. One thing that stood out for me in the Pew report is the disheartening statistic of Christians who become disaffiliated before they turn 30. Currently, a third or 31% of young adults are heading for the church doors with little likelihood that we will ever see them involved in the daring and hopeful living that defines the Christian faith ever again. These are the kids that grew up in the church, attended Sunday school, participated in youth programs, went on life-changing mission trips, stood in front of our congregations on Confirmation Sunday to affirm the faith, became members of the church, came back from college to read Scriptures on Christmas Eve and now they are choosing to leave the Christian faith behind. I can’t help but wonder if they are leaving because we could not show them in a meaningful and joyful and honest and exciting manner what faith is and what we do with faith.

In her weekly reflections on Substack, religious scholar Diana Butler Bass said that she hopes the church will not ignore this recent Pew report. “***Demographics are not***

*destiny; trends are not predestination.” She wrote, “**Although Christianity probably will be a minority faith in a much more pluralistic nation in the next few decades, those of us who are Christians still have much work to do in advance of that huge, historic shift. Denial is a terrible strategy. Nostalgia is a dangerous choice. Letting the future take its own course is a kind of surrender of responsibility... The choices that this generation makes [will] impress themselves on those who will follow us. Because the future is right around the corner.**”<sup>x</sup>*

Sometimes I ask myself if many of us have to an extent already surrendered to the inevitability of a future where most of the children we baptize and the young people we confirm will be strangers to the faith that gives us hope to see the world with our hearts. I don’t know if you noticed my sermon title today – “**Teaching Horticulture to Martians**”.<sup>xi</sup> I borrowed it from the section in Bill McKibben’s book “*The Flag, The Cross, and The Station Wagon*” in which he talks about the demographic and cultural shifts that are taking place in the country. McKibben points out that mainstream Christianity has already lost its power, prestige and authority in American life. Specially in suburban and progressive circles, McKibben wrote, “**Christianity is more than marginal: it is disparaged, and more commonly, disregarded.**”<sup>xii</sup> He talks about teaching a course to a group of college students on “Stories from the Bible” and how not one single student, even though they elected to take the class, knew anything at all about the subject. It felt like teaching horticulture to Martians.<sup>xiii</sup>

We have gotten used to the idea that there is no other option for us but decline and too many of the people who are still in the pews appear to have quiet-quit the Church because talking about our faith and hope to young people and our progressive suburban neighbors feels as impossible as teaching horticulture to Martians.

I am sure most of you have heard about the new term called “quiet-quitting.” It’s hard to miss it because this new philosophy has received a lot of media coverage. In a nutshell, quiet-quitting means that rather than leaving their jobs, workers are doing only what is strictly necessary to meet their job description. They are setting better boundaries for themselves by giving up on the idea of going above and beyond at work without being properly paid for the extra effort they are willing or asked to make. Despite criticism from employers and CEO’s who worry about diminished productivity and lack of engagement, the philosophy behind quiet-quitting is a powerful option for people who are deciding to prioritize other parts of their lives that are not related to what they do for a living. I can’t imagine how the Church would not support workers who want to spend more time with family or give more of their time to volunteer at their local congregations.

Sadly though, in the context of the church, quiet-quitting takes on a whole different direction and dimension. It’s worrisome to watch many Christians take a step back and only do the bare minimum to support the mission and ministries of faith and hope of the church. Some hardly ever show up. Many have such low expectations for the future of their congregations that they seldom get engaged with the youth group or confirmation class.

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The quiet-quitters are surrendering their responsibility to make the Christian faith relevant to a new generation of Christians. They are allowing their faith to atrophy and their hope in the power of God to do more than we can ask or imagine to become hostage to disengagement. They are choosing to look only at the evidence of the loss of church members and have decided that there is nothing we can do to change this reality even though the Pew report also observed that, at present, 21% of the people without religious affiliation become Christians as young adults.

Friends, our hope for the church cannot be tied to the reality of the world; it has to be grounded in our faith and faith is not something we have but something we decide to practice because we know that faith puts into motion chains of events that can make real changes happen.

While I was doing some research for this sermon, I came across an article published in the New York Times in 2013 that made a surprisingly simple and yet intriguing claim – ***“The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.”***<sup>xiv</sup> The writer, Bruce Feiler, said at the time that stunning breakthroughs in knowledge about how to make families work more effectively showed that children who know about their family’s history develop a stronger “intergenerational self.” They grow up feeling that they belong to something bigger than themselves. They hold on to stories of success, hardship, love and hope in the face of difficulties that give them an identity and core values for the rest of their lives. Feiler noted that ***“decades of research have shown that most happy families communicate effectively.”***<sup>xv</sup> The bottom line, he concluded, convey a sense of your family history to your children. Use holidays, vacations, big family get-togethers, even a ride to the mall and hokey family traditions to passed down to your children all that holds your family together. ***“Create, refine and retell the story of your family’s positive moments and your ability to bounce back from the difficult ones. That act alone,”*** Feiler wrote, ***“may increase the odds that your family will thrive for many generations to come.”***<sup>xvi</sup>

Friends, don’t quiet-quit ACC. Don’t give up on the hope that the grace of God, the teachings of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit still hold our church together. Make a bold decision to practice your faith so we may continue to struggle against all evidence to bring healing and love and justice and peace and faith and true life to the suburbs where we live. Don’t give up. Recommit yourselves to the faith that empowers us to see with the eye of our hearts. Keep fighting the good fight of faith. Be intentional about coming to worship because the stories we tell each other here, the Scriptures we read, the songs we sing, the mission we carry out strengthen our faith muscles. Make time and volunteer to help ACC instill an “intergenerational self” into the hearts and minds of our young people. Andrew can’t be the only person responsible for giving our youth a Christian identity. He needs us to help him share with your children why you have decided to remain “prisoners of hope” even if at times, speaking about the faith that enlivens our hope feels like teaching horticulture to Martians.

Friends, faith is a decision to believe despite the evidence and it is this faith that gives us hope that the evidence can be changed and, with God's help, we can increase the odds that at least some in the next generation will also be imprisoned by the hope of the Gospel.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, John Calvin in The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 3, Chapter II, Part 1, p. 560.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Hebrews 11:6.

<sup>iv</sup> Hebrews 11:1.

<sup>v</sup> Quote attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. – see Quote Investigator [<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/04/18/staircase/>].

<sup>vi</sup> Edited by Paul Rogat Loeb in The Impossible Will Take a Little While, Prisoners of Hope by Cornel West, Locations 4099-41-65 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>vii</sup> Frederick Buechner in Secrets in the Dark, Faith, pp. 70-71.

<sup>viii</sup> Jim Wallis in Faith Works, Locations 377-380 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>ix</sup> Pew Research Center - Modeling the Future of Religion in America, 13 September 2022 [<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>].

<sup>x</sup> Diana Butler Bass in The Future of Faith, published in The Cottage, 23 September 2022 [[https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/the-future-of-faith?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/the-future-of-faith?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)].

<sup>xi</sup> Bill McKibben in The Flag, The Cross, and the Station Wagon, p. 109.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid., p.90.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>xiv</sup> By Bruce Feiler in The Stories that Bind Us, The New York Times, 15 March 2013 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html>].

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.