

Should the seals stay or should they go?

Earlier this year a decade long battle finally came to a close after much high emotion and the expenditure of tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees and court costs.

Here's what happened. At the beautiful little beach in La Jolla, CA called the Children's Pool the Harbor Seals came and decided to stay. It's a pretty, protected cove, and there is sand for basking and gentle waves for playing. The seals delighted the tourists with their funny noises and antics. But the people who live and swim there regularly were not so amused. They became concerned about the seals. Their waste was contaminating the pristine water of the cove and it was felt that their presence might draw sharks that prey on the seals. It's a little like how we feel about the deer here in our area. The visitors love to look at Bambi and see him or her cavorting in the woods and fields, but if you have ever had to have your car repaired from the damage from hitting one, or if you have had your garden destroyed by a deer, they don't seem so cute anymore either. They are a danger and a nuisance to us.

Well, after much animosity between the swimmers and the seal lovers, and because the town wasn't doing anything about the situation, a resident brought a lawsuit against the city to have the seals removed. The Children's Cove area was property of the city. It had been deeded to the city with the understanding that the beach was to be set aside for young beachgoers and swimmers. Certainly the deed to the town did not include allowing seals to swim and sunbathe in that beautiful little cove. They might pose a danger to children.

The matter was brought before the courts and both sides presented their arguments in both state and federal courts. At one time conflicting rulings were issued. But finally, the city, which favors having the seals stay, won the case and the seals are allowed to continue sunning themselves as long as they wish at Children's Cove.

The seals meantime, through all of this, continued to play and sun themselves and catch fish in the cove, oblivious to all the fuss. Ah, to be worry-free like a seal and not get caught up in fights and controversies that sap our energy and leave us feeling less sure of our faith and our love of neighbor.

(On the other hand, after reading the new Time Magazine cover story about what animals think, they may well have their own worries to contend with. Well, that's a sermon for another day.)

Jesus said to his disciples "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." This great promise sums up all Jesus has been saying about not getting caught up in our fears and anxieties. Spending thousands of dollars, and years in court doesn't seem to me to be what Jesus meant by Kingdom life. But at the same time we always have to make decisions about balancing those justice issues which we care deeply about, with peace of mind and serenity of spirit. Jesus wants something for his disciples that seems out of our reach at times: nothing short of the Kingdom of God where "mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other". (psalm 85:10).

What that verse from Psalm 85 says is that God's truth will prevail over all of us at the end of the day. We are imperfect. But at the same time God's mercy will set us free. We will seek righteousness and justice, but at the same time we will know peace. How will this ever be possible? This seems like an impossible promise, like the one about the lion lying down with the lamb. (Isaiah 11:6 paraphrase).

Living with promises that have not yet come true; this is what Paul tackles that in his letter to the Hebrews. (By the way, we also had this same epistle reading on Independence Day if any of you are feeling as though we just heard this same passage recently.) Paul uses Abraham as an example of someone who lived by God's promises even though they had not come true. That is faith, Paul says.

But let's back up a little first and look at our reading from Genesis. We can understand what Paul is talking about better if we first remember what happened with Abram or Abraham as he is later known. As I said in my little comments in your bulletin about this reading, Abram was made promises by God. Abram responded in faith. He believed what God told him but, it is now many years later. Much has happened to Abram, but he still has not seen the promises come true. Yes, he has acquired some land, but as he says, "I continue childless". God speaks to Abram again and repeats his earlier promise that he would have offspring and that they will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abram believed God, and that made him a righteous person.

So, when Paul is trying to explain what faith is in the portion of Hebrews we heard today, he starts off with a definition just as any preacher might do. "Faith is assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen." Paul might have recited the Genesis passage in Hebrew since his listeners would have been very familiar with the Hebrew Torah. He may have talked about the meaning of the original Hebrew. Then Paul quickly moves to using examples from the Hebrew Scripture. In Paul's day as in ours a definition of a concept is never as meaningful as an **example** of someone who embodies the concept. You can see that our passage for today leaves out some verses. In these Paul is citing other Biblical characters who showed the kind of faith he is talking about; Abel, Enoch and Noah. Then Paul speaks of Abraham. Abraham heard what God promised, looked forward in hope and continued to do so until he died. From Abraham's example it is easier to see that faith isn't about having everything happen just the way we want or in the time frame that we would like. Through faith we live knowing the promises are true and will come true.

Paul worries that the people of his day have misunderstood what faith is just as we sometimes do today. We hear someone say, "I have my faith." Faith is not an immovable and impenetrable object to be carried around and displayed for others to see. Yet at the same time when someone is faithful you can spot them right away. They have a certain

peacefulness about them, whether they are standing up for things that should be changed, or accepting of things that cannot be changed. Faithful people trust God and God's promises, and they trust people too. Faithful people have their doubts though, as Abraham did. It is a misconception that faith is the opposite of doubt. Living faith questions how things are, and why they are, and wrestles with issues with God and other people.

Faith makes it possible to accomplish much. Faith is like courage. With faith we are empowered and challenged to go out and do something that we might not think we have the ability to do.

And faith is a gift. It is not something we can muster up with our own will power. It is a gift from God, a virtue that we receive by grace that allows us to live knowing the promises really are true.

Jesus tells us to have our lamps lit in Luke's Gospel. Be ready. Have faith that the Kingdom will come just as surely as Christ will come again. We may not see it in our lifetimes. Just as Abraham did not see all of God's promises come true in his lifetime.

The founders of this parish lived by faith when they decided to build this church. They saw some of their dreams come true, but not others. They planted trees and did not see them grow to their maturity. They planted the trees in faith that our generation would get to enjoy the shade of those trees. We in turn have to plant trees that other generations will enjoy.

Maybe those seals sunning themselves in Children's Cove have faith too. I don't know the mind of a seal, but they look as unconcerned and faithful as I wish to feel. Is it just naïveté or do they have it all figured out?

Jesus promised us, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."