

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 Bill Uetricht Pentecost 9 8.7.25

For a long time, I have been a fan of the country singer Alan Jackson. His simple, smooth, authentically country sound has always been pleasant to my ears. One of my favorite songs of his is “Here in the Real World.” In that song, Jackson croons:

Cowboys don’t cry and heroes don’t die. Good
always wins, again and again. And love is a sweet
dream, that always comes true. Oh, if life were
like the movies, I’d never be blue.

But here in the real world, it’s not that easy at all.
Cause when hearts get broken, it’s real tears
that fall. And darlin’ it’s sad but true, but the one
thing I’ve learned from you, is how the boy don’t
always get the girl, here in the real world.

Oh, I love these tears-in-your-beer songs. I told Justin Avdek, who played for our Wednesday concert in North Muskegon, and who seems to like to sing sad songs, that we as a culture probably suffer because we don’t have enough sad songs. I know that’s true in the church. We need more lament songs that help us feel more and get us more in touch with the pain of the world.

But that is all tangential. For today’s purposes, I am more intrigued with Jackson’s talk of the “real world.” In the real world, he is saying, there aren’t always happy endings. And the real world, he seems to think, is worth paying attention to. But what is the real world?

I believe that this question is one that the book of Hebrews is asking. The people who received this book lived in the real world.

These Christians who had a Jewish history and bent were more than likely folks who were publicly ridiculed and imprisoned. They probably had some of their property confiscated. They weren't living the life "where cowboys don't cry and heroes don't die." They were facing very difficult challenges. Some of them, as a result, were choosing not to meet with other Jewish Christians because such public gatherings would get them in trouble. Some of them, also, were abandoning the faith all together. The goal of Hebrews was to get these folks to hang in there, to live by faith.

In today's reading, the author of Hebrews begins his words of encouragement by talking about the nature of faith. In what are relatively famous words, the author says: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." For faith, life isn't always about what you can see or touch. For faith, life isn't always about the facts on the ground.

Let's be honest. Here in the real world, you don't always get to see the good. Here in the real world, when you look around, life doesn't always seem penetrated by the life-giving presence of God. Sometimes the visual evidence in our lives suggests that evil reigns, that the good don't prosper, that hate is stronger than love. For the author of Hebrews we need to look beyond what we can see. We understand, the author of Hebrews says, that space—all the stuff that is—and time were created and are created by something that we cannot visualize. Life comes into being through something that cannot be fully grasped or measured. There is something remarkably mysterious, numinous, the theologians like to call it, about being itself. You try to grasp the mystery, you try to hold the

mystery, you try to figure it out, but you can't. But you know that it's real. Good luck in trying to prove its realness.

Presbyterian thinker Frederick Buechner says, "Almost nothing that makes any difference can be proved. I cannot prove that life is better than death or love is better than hate. I cannot prove the greatness of the great or the beauty of the beautiful. Faith can't prove a da...ed thing. Or a blessed thing either."

Oh, that's good. In the real world, almost nothing that makes a real difference can be proved, an insight that makes me a little nervous about the trends in education, business, and church life that depend upon the conviction that everything needs to be measured. Test everything. Test everybody. Look only at the bottom line, and you'll figure out what you need to know. Now, I am not naïve. Tests can be helpful instruments. Profit reports are necessary for any business. Churches need to pay attention to budget and membership numbers. But don't think that those standards of measurement will take care of life. What is most real cannot, most of the time, be captured by numbers. Sometimes what is most real is invisible to the eye.

The call, then, is to live by faith. And Hebrews would want to suggest that, contrary to what we might expect and what others might tell us, the world of faith is the real world. So often, we are led to believe that faith is not the real world, but some kind of fantasy world. For some, faith is an escape from the real world. Karl Marx described religion as the "opiate of the people," something that dulled them, caused them not to deal with and respond to the real concerns of the real world. But that is bad religion. And yes, there is plenty of bad religion.

It shows up in religion that does poor intellectual work, work that denies the reality of science and its insights. This kind of religion can cause people to flee the real world, to go to some never-never land where you are called to believe things that are preposterous. The world is not 6000 years old. Dinosaurs did not exist on the ark with Noah. Vaccines are not the work of the devil. Faith is not an invitation into intellectual dullness.

But faith is, nonetheless, our calling. The author of Hebrews speaks of our foremothers and forefathers in the faith as people “who confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth.” They were folks who were “seeking a homeland, a better country, a heavenly one.” These foremothers and forefathers were seeking the real world. And by that, I am not indicating that the real world is the place you go when you die, although, frankly, it might be the completion of the real world. As an aside, it intrigues me that the book of Revelation speaks of the end not as a matter of no earth or sky, but a new heaven and a new earth. The earth and the heavens were completed. They become what they were meant to be from the beginning.

This is what people of faith are seeking and longing for in the midst of the real world. In the midst of this real world that is shaped by human choice and human evil, people of faith are yearning for another real world, the realest world of all, Hebrews would have us know, the world of God.

And you have to admit that the real world of God looks different than the real world that you and I live in. It doesn't operate in the same way that the world that we see does. The real world of God is a better country. The world of faith trusts something that isn't always

verified by the so-called facts, something that isn't always visible, but something, nonetheless, that will take us to a better place.

The world of the facts may suggest that revenge and war are the only way. But the world of faith says that there is a better land, there is a better way. The world of the facts may suggest that you should play it safe, that you should never risk, that you should put up a big sign on your lawn and on your heart that says, "Keep out." For after all, you never know how much people will take advantage of you and mess up your yard. The world of faith will take the risk, will open up the self, will put up a sign that says, "Welcome all."

The world of faith will see folks on the bottom or on the fringe, folks that our real world can dismiss easily, not as losers, but as ones who can reveal the very heart of God. You see, here in the real world of God, compassion, love, grace, forgiveness, and generosity run the show.

I can't help but be taken in by the words that Jesus speaks in our gospel lesson for today about the kingdom, what today I am calling the "real world." He says, "Do not be afraid, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." God *gives* the kingdom, the real world. In fact, he likes giving it. God is a God of generosity. And what he gives is his way of being in the world, the way of love, compassion, and service.

You probably missed a small detail in Jesus' parable today. In what is probably a story about his returning to the earth, he says, "Blessed are those slaves (us) whom the master finds alert when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will serve them."

What? The master serves the slaves? As Mary Hinkle says, the master says, “I feel like cooking. Is anybody hungry?” And the next thing you know, the master is beating eggs and rummaging around for the waffle iron. “You sit still,” he says. “This morning I will serve you.”

This is the way it is in the real “real world.” God is generous. God serves. If you don’t believe it, look at the life of Jesus. Look at his death. Our God is giving and forgiving. Our God is gracious. This is the deepest truth of life. This is the realest real world. Now, live in that world. Trust that world. Walk by faith.