

“Who Lives in You?”

Today’s the lessons from Galatians and Luke represent the heart and the soul of Christianity. If you and I were able to lay aside our ... sometimes ... bias opinions regarding the Christian church as an institution ... and meditate long and hard on these two lessons ... our faith would greatly expand. Unfortunately, however, we all too often bring to the scriptures our negative baggage ... primarily as a result of bad church experiences. We remember how we were treated poorly in another church or perhaps even this one. We remember growing up and how hard we tried to be good, but failed ... how the guilt of past sins kept piling up. We recall the times we felt worthless ... how some sermons or preachers made us feel bad about ourselves ... which made us think that it was useless to even try to do better.

Then there are the experiences of “church fights.” We may even carry the scars of a church fight ... or a time of being ostracized ... shunned. Sometimes Christ’s Church can be very cold and cruel ... can be the worse place to experience God’s love ... the worse place to hear good news ... the worse place to meet Jesus Christ. Then again ... sometimes ... with God’s blessings ... Christ’s Church can be the best place.

I encourage you to take these two scripture lessons seriously, because in the final analysis, laying aside our past experiences and opinions, what truly matters to God is our faith. When we die and stand before our Maker ... what will count most is our faith: did we believe and did we act upon our belief? Bias opinions, negative feelings, and excuses will mean nothing to God. What matters most to God is our faith and faith alone ... and by the grace of God and only by the grace will we have the opportunity to stand before the judgment seat of God.

There are times in our lives when we are caught in a fog ... the way is unclear ... we do not know which way to turn. There are times in our lives when we are adrift ... floating ... waiting ... waiting for “something” to happen that might change the course of our life. Such a time is recalled by John Henry Newman in a 19th Century hymn. The subject of the hymn is faith ... an active faith. The hymn was written when, Newman, a British clergyman, was aboard a sailing ship going home to England from Italy. Between the islands of Corsica and Sardinia the ship was caught in a very dense fog. The air was motionless so that the boat could not use her sails. Nor could the captain see any shoreline. For a week the ship was caught in choking dimness. One night, the terrified clergyman wrote this poignant prayer, later put to music:

*Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, Lead thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home; Lead thou me on!
Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene;
One step enough for me.*

The Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard uses a similar image when attempting to define faith. He writes: “To be sitting quietly in a boat in calm water is not an image of faith. But when the boat has sprung a leak, to keep it afloat by enthusiastically manning the pumps, yet with no thought of returning to port --- that is an image of faith. While the understanding, like a desperate passenger stretches out its arms to (land) but in vain, faith works with all its might in the deep waters; joyfully and triumphantly it saves the soul.”

In deep waters ... when in life we are over our heads ... is it not then we stretch our soul in prayer to God? In deep waters ... when in life we are desperate for strength for today and hope for tomorrow ... is it not then we turn from this world toward God? By faith ... we tread water. However, treading means action on our part. Therefore, living by faith means we are doing something. Standing still, waiting for the leak to go away or the boat to sink, is not an act of faith. The word faith implies activity. Faith is a source ... a means not an end.

Luke’s wonderful story of the sinful woman anointing the feet of Jesus is an example of justification by faith. Luke has a fondness for banquet scenes and here he uses one as the setting for Jesus’ forgiveness of a person whose sin is deep and long term. Jesus is invited to the house of Simon, a Pharisee, for dinner. As the meal proceeds, a woman of bad repute enters and washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses his feet, and anoints them, not with cheap olive oil, but with expensive ointment. Simon is incensed that Jesus would allow this woman of low repute to do this, for by Jewish law to be touched by her is to be contaminated with her sin. This gives Jesus an opportunity to teach about going beyond the law (as Paul does in Galatians) ... the idea that grace tops law and that one is not justified by the works of the Law but by acts of love and grace. Jesus tells the woman: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace!” By faith the woman is redeemed.

The interesting contrast in Luke's story is between a very religious person, a Pharisee, and a very non-religious person, a prostitute ... between two attitudes --- one dictated by the mind ... the other by the heart. Why did Simon the Pharisee invite Jesus to dinner? Perhaps Simon was a collector of celebrities and wanted to be known for having this amazing young Galilean in his house for a meal with him. However, because Simon was a person who was patronizing Jesus, he was conscious of no need or felt no love, and so received no forgiveness. Simon's impression of himself was that he was a good person in the sight of others and of God. On the other hand, the woman was conscious of nothing else than a crying need, and therefore was overwhelmed with love for Jesus who could meet her need, and so she received forgiveness.

Jesus teaches that the one thing that shuts a person off from God is self-sufficiency. Many people today feel they are self-made ... so self-sufficient that they have no need for God ... until they discover their self-sufficiency is not enough to pull them through a real human crisis. The truth is a truly good person knows the real depths of their sins. Paul spoke of sinners while referring to himself when he said "...of whom I am foremost."

Francis of Assisi said of himself: *There is nowhere a more wretched and more miserable sinner than I.* It is true to say that the greatest of sins is to be conscious of no sin. However, a sense of real need will open the door to the forgiveness of God, because God is love and love's greatest glory is to be needed. One author writes: *Have you not observed that faith is generally strongest in those whose character may be called the weakest?*

Faith comes from the Latin word "fide" and is used in two ways. In the first, faith is an attitude, as in the statement: "So and so is a person of faith." In the second use, faith may mean the set of beliefs a person holds, as in the statement: "So and so believes in the Christian faith." In the first use, faith is a verb ... in the second, faith is a noun. The first use is the most proper and is the meaning contained in our two lessons. Faith is an action verb ... a means to an end --- not the end itself. "By faith" means an exercise of our will ... a putting into practice our trust in God, rather than belief in certain doctrines.

This is the effect of Paul's statement about being justified *by faith in Christ alone* and not by legal works. "By faith" is a resourceful action available to all, even to those of bad reputations. Today, what we need in the Church is "less beliefs and more belief!" Every artist earns his or her masterpiece. Handel earned "The Messiah" with 21 days of non-stop pouring out of his soul. Michelangelo paid the price of his masterpiece on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with months of agonizing toil flat on his back. Beethoven struggled with his growing deafness even while composing the Ninth Symphony.

Also, the masterpieces of life come with an investment of faith. There are times in our life when we must live "by faith" and faith alone; a time to act "by faith" and faith alone. Tough, tough choices --- difficult decisions --- times when our stomach is in our throat, tears poured out uncontrollably, weakness felt throughout our whole body --- by faith, and by no other way, we live to fight another day ... we find the strength to take another step ... we do what must be done. But our doing, our acting by faith, is God going with us ... God leading us out into the waters where we find "the Christ of the deep" ... the Christ that gives us the ability and the strength to keep on treading.

This is where I draw my image of a church that is healthy to one's faith. A church is where people, who are conscious of treading in this big pond of life, discover they are not alone. They look around and see others struggling to keep afloat. As an act of faith, folks reach out to one another in order to provide support. "By faith" we reach out and act as Christ did one to the other. We love and forgive ... we give and receive ... we care and are cared for ... we bless and are blessed. A church is an ark, one that has room for everyone, and makes a conscious effort to bring people on board.

"By faith," we exercise God's will through our genuine concern for one another. Together, we place our trust in God, while at the same time, we place our trust in each other. Only by faith can we be a genuine church ... only by faith can God lead us in the right direction ... and only by faith do we have a purpose as a church and are able to accomplish anything.

In your own life, pray always for greater faith that you may not only stay afloat, but be granted the grace to dance and celebrate life! And in our life together as a church, let us pray always for greater faith that we may do together ... greater things ... in the name of Jesus Christ! Amen!!