

Introduction

Jeff and I have been preaching from Luke since Advent of last year, that is November 29, 2015 – that was the beginning of Year C of the church calendar. Year A is focuses on Matthew, Year B focuses on Mark, and Year C focuses on Luke. The gospel of John is interspersing into these 3 years.

The book of Luke begins with a preface in the first chapter which is followed by 4 distinct parts:

- in the first section Luke narrates the account of Jesus’ birth and early years, before his public life began;
- in the second section Luke presents Jesus’ Galilean ministry;
- Luke 9:51-19:44 relates Jesus teachings on his way to Jerusalem; and
- from there until the end of the Gospel, Luke tells us about Jesus’ death and resurrection.

We are still in the third section where Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem; we have been studying this part of the Gospel since June, digging deeper as the weeks have gone by.

This is all part of a time in the church year that we call the Pentecost Season (now the 20th Sunday of this season), where we focus almost exclusively on how we are called to live out our Christian lives, what it means to participate in the reign of Christ, principally as disciples who are called to the church.

I think it is good once in a while to remember our Sunday journey – there is a definite method and progression we are following. Each Sunday stands alone as a celebration of God’s presence with us for certain, but the church seasons also narrate the larger biblical story gradually, week after week. This particular season has not always been an easy journey as there have been some really difficult texts that we have been invited to reflect on.

For myself, I have been growing into a deeper place of gratitude that I have been entrusted with studying these texts over the past year with you, and then being invited to preach them with you on Sunday mornings. There is so much grace in this process of studying the Word of God. It is self-evidently a task which invites much gratitude – *studying the Word of God*. Thank you for allowing me to be here with you.

Body of the Text

Forgiveness again

In our text for today Jesus interrupts his conversation with the Pharisees (16:14-31 and 17:20-21) in order to speak with those closest to him, his disciples. Our text begins with the disciples pleading with Jesus to increase their faith. What was it that made the disciples seemingly beg Jesus for more faith? Well, in the verses just preceding these words Jesus tells them to forgive, even 7 times a day if necessary – just forgive.

That was the subject of my last sermon so I will not delve too deeply into it here today.

But here we are again with *forgiveness*; such a telling text where just the thought of needing to forgive has the disciples very anxious and asking for more faith.

As usual, Jesus is very clear about what he thinks about forgiveness. The way to follow Christ is to forgive quickly – 7 times a day if necessary.

Increasing our faith

And the disciple's reaction to Jesus' statement about forgiveness: "*Lord, increase our faith*", they say.

There is a lot of negative self-talk that can accompany this line of thinking - "If I only had more faith"...

If I just had more faith I would not have so many questions or doubts;

God would answer my prayers if I had just a little more faith;

With a little more faith he/she would have gotten better faster, or would not have struggled so much;

With a little more faith I would be a better person, parent, husband, wife, son or daughter;

If I had a little more faith my life would be different.

Does that sound familiar?

To look at faith this way is a misunderstanding of faith and can even be harmful – people having guilt heaped on their shoulders because they feel they lack faith, that they are somehow inadequate. But this is the wrong perspective. It makes faith into a "work" and not the free gift from God that it is.

Jesus is clear in this text that faith is not about quantity or size at all. It is not a currency that we can save up and spend as needed. Faith is not a thing we need to get or earn. After all, Jesus says that the faith of a mustard seed will move a tree in to the sea. It is not about the amount of faith at all.

Faith as Lutherans

Rather, I think that the message is that faith is a *relationship* of trust and love; a relationship initiated by God, something to be lived day-by-day. It is in this *relationship* that our lives are sustained and transformed.

And this relationship is defined by Christ joining us on our journey as the presence of grace. Some scholars have noted that a better translation of Paul's expression, "*faith in Christ*" is actually "*faith of Christ*". This is not such a small difference as it may appear; it means that we are participating in a faith journey that Jesus has already walked. Jesus has joined us on our journey, already traveled.

This brings God near – right here, around us, between us, among us – inspiring faith from within ourselves and our community.

The disciples understood this. In our text they ask Jesus to, "*Increase our faith*". It is not their *individual* faith that the disciples are hoping to increase; it is their *collective* faith they are inquiring about. Our Christian living

is really about community and relationship all the way to the bottom – something to be respected and honoured right here at Zion as well as outside the walls of the church. And it is an ongoing commitment.

Daily courageous trust in God

Faith is not a package of goodies to be collected all at once; but rather it is a *daily courageous trust* in who God is and in what he has done for us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer proclaims,

“The faith that you will confess today with all your heart needs to be regained tomorrow, indeed every day anew.”

Each day provides a new opportunity for us to align our lives with this truth – that grace and faith are gifts from a God who loves us. We are invited to respond with a courageous “Yes Lord, I say yes.”

Last week, as I was working on this sermon, I went for a walk early one morning; it was about 6 a.m. It was still pitch dark when I left the house. I could hear the ducks quacking in the river all the way from my front door. As I came to the bottom of Guthrie and turned left onto William Street about the 3rd or 4th house had virtually every light on. It was a peculiar sight, where all around was pitch dark while this house was fully lit.

As I got closer I could see that something had happened here. There was an older woman sitting on the steps with her head in her hands, and a younger woman sitting beside her, leaning toward her, offering comfort. As I walked closer to the house, cars started to appear and pull up along the roadside and then an ambulance too. There was no panic, as if someone needed immediate care, so I could not help but wonder if someone had died in that house on that morning.

The image of those two sitting on the steps just outside the front door haunted me for the rest of the day. It forced me to reflect on what faith really means for us, right here and now. How does it affect the way we live? How does it give us courage in the face of suffering or celebration; how does it provide strength in our joy or in the final moments of life?

To put another way, *how does a life of faith avoid shallow optimism which, to remain intact, must close its eyes on the data of despair; while, at the same time, avoiding equally shallow pessimism which refuses to perceive even mystery, let alone heaven?*

Walking around the river each day has helped me realize that faith begins with awe in the face of great mystery – the mystery that is God, who is everywhere.

There is a part of us that knows the infinitely trustworthiness of God and part of us that does not. Each day provides a new opportunity for us to discover this as truth, to surrender to it - teaching us over and over again that God is with us in all things...day by day...learning that God is present in our lives, that he is trustworthy. This is faith.

It is not an abstract concept; *it is a living expression of a deep inner patience that urges us to accept the passages of life – joys and trials – as part of the human experience; not to be feared but to be embraced as sacred.*

That the mystery of God passes through the cross anticipates the journey which Jesus shares with us, intimately concealed as a profound and gentle presence which flows and carries us along through tragedies and joys alike – and will continue to do so in every moment of our lives up to and through death itself, and beyond.

The gift of faith changes us fundamentally into a community which can:

Forgive; love our neighbour as ourselves (including our enemies); serve; and spread the healing message of Christ beyond these walls of the church through our activities within our communities.

...and all because we know and believe that we may place our trust in the mercy and love of a God who cares about what is happening right now, here, today.

Conclusion

We may ask for more faith (as the disciples did in our text for today) so that we may heal others and “move trees into the sea”, but God, who understands our need far better than we do, gives us greater compassion so that we may stand with each other through the difficult times of our lives. That was the one thing that was clear as I walked past that house early in the morning the other day. Compassion echoed from the young woman as she sat with her grieving neighbour. This is faith too, wrapped up in the trying and the difficult activities we share.

It says, “I will sit with you as you mourn; I am beside you in your struggle.”

Indeed, we are never alone.

We have God’s promise that he will never leave us, and that he joins us on each step of our journey... and we have each other. That is the gift of faith; it is a relationship initiated by a God who cares for what is happening in our lives this very moment, and who calls us together in fidelity and trust for the sometimes joyful, sometimes difficult journey that is yet to come. All we can do is receive it, trust it, allow it, and celebrate it as an invitation to join the wonderful dance of our lives.

This is the life of faith.

Be gentle with each other, our relationships are central to our faith journeys here on earth.

Amen