

“Faith: Another Five-letter Word”

Every once in a while I preach sermons based on 4-letter words (love, hope etc.) and as today, 5-letter words (Peace). And today I read a text in order to follow the ideals of Dag Hammarskjold who said: "If only I may become: firmer ... simpler ... quieter ... warmer . . . "

A parishioner is Sooke once shared with me the best sermon he had ever heard. It was three words long and went like this: “Keep the faith.” I’ve never forgotten that sermon. It’s practical; it’s biblical; it’s intimate; it’s profound. “Keep the faith!” It runs the risk of turning faith into a commodity, where faith is like a thing that you pick up in your hands at the grocery store. To counteract this minimalist tendency consider the primary text of Hebrews 11:1 which Farrar Fenton renders this way: “Faith is the standing ground of the hopeful, the conviction of unseen facts.”

Far more than a thing, faith is the place from which we view God and our surroundings. As in other years, BC has exploded in forest fires and into this malestron, Kathie and I will holiday, hopefully safely. Years ago, our priest in Salmon Arm described to me a particular fire situation. He said you can see the fire on the hills above the town, but it is not yet there and he wasn’t sure it was going to come his way, or even affect him directly. So goes faith, as it takes us on a journey, we know not where, nor when, nor sometimes even how.

Consider Abraham and Sarah, who had a running conversation with God, made possible because of their faith, which was the standing ground from which they viewed God and the world. Their faith enabled them to travel into unknown territory, free of fear, without knowledge of a specific destination or outcome. Their faith even enabled them to have a child and a heritage as elderly people in an ancient, pre-scientific age.

Speaking of different ages, faith has been variously appreciated throughout history, as Anglican writer Martin Smith tells us. In the middle ages, the church taught and urged faith upon all peoples, and in so doing punished those who rejected it. The opposite of faith was therefore heresy. In the nineteenth century, Darwin in science and Kierkegaard in philosophy and Napoleon in politics radically challenged historical understandings of God and our world. Hence the opposite of faith became doubt. In our own day, as we

are tossed and turned by shifts in technology, communication, and in self-understanding, the opposite of faith has become certainty.

So, then, if the opposite of faith in our day is certainty, then we as people of faith can turn to mystery without embarrassment. To be certain is to be self-convinced, even at times self-possessed. To be unsure is to be still on the journey, not knowing which way the fire or the Spirit of God will travel.

If faith then seems an aloof concept to understand, this is intentionally so. Possibly an example of a faith-response is more easily grasped. I close my thoughts this morning with a story from an Australian colleague who writes:

“There was a man who worked in an architectural firm. His name was Kevin. He found only one other Christian in his workplace. Kevin said he always dressed very simply, and only had a few sets of clothing. His work mates had always wondered why he never dressed better than he did. He always ate very simply, and was considered a little odd by others in the firm. He earned as much as anyone else, yet didn't seem to live to the same standard.

Kevin became a friend of this man, and visited him at home. 'Home' was a small one room apartment -- what in Australia is called a bedsitter. People's perceptions of this gentle but unusual man were dramatically changed when he shared a letter with Kevin which he had received from Korea. He showed Kevin the letter because he didn't know what to do about it.

The letter was from a Korean orphanage who were sending a delegation to Australia to meet and personally thank their 'rich benefactor'. It seems that this man who lived so simply had been 'reverse tithing', or something very near to it. He had been sending the major portion of his income, over many years, to support that Korean orphanage, and lived off the meager amount left.

People were moved by this staggering generosity. The hat was passed around in the firm to buy a new suit and pair of shoes for this man, so that he could meet the Korean delegation at the airport with the dignity they felt he deserved. The motives of this man's fellow workers were honourable, but somehow I think there was something lost in their well

intentioned gift. They were moved by his generosity, but somewhat embarrassed by its sacrificial nature.” (end quote)

For me, the clue is in the last two words: “Sacrificial nature.” To live by faith means to live a life of at least partial sacrifice, to let go of the self-centred control which money, prestige, education and so forth can provide and to use each of these, with the faith that God will provide, in the service of others including God.

Segue over to today’s Gospel and we find the same behaviour enjoined: “Sell your possessions . . . and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out . . . for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Thanks be to God!