

The Reverend Shelley Ryan
St. Luke's Episcopal Church ~ Anchorage, Kentucky
20th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22) October 1 & 2, 2016
Luke 17:5-10

Increase our faith! Isn't this what many of us want? Isn't faith why most of us are here tonight/today? After all – our faith is essential to our Christian walk and without where would we be? If only it was easy to attain, but for many folks faith tends to vacillate from just barely hanging on by a thread (if at all) to experiencing a sense of elation due to a powerful event occurring in our life. In contrast, our faith can be shaken during the stormy times in life, and especially when something tragic happens, and we may find ourselves asking “Where is God in this?” and our faith is shaken, as a result. Think about it - our Christian walk and discipleship relies on faith.

When the disciples proclaimed to Jesus “Increase our faith!” they requested this because Jesus’ teachings had made them keenly aware of the faith they would require to live a life as a disciple of Jesus. Among other things this walk of discipleship required truth-telling, perfect forgiveness, fervent prayer, and servanthood. Therefore, they knew that in order to be a disciple their faith must be increased. Faith is not a quantitative commodity it is a sincere trust in the promises of God – Faith is a gift from God.

Jesus’ teaching emphasizes the importance of life in Christian community and he reminds His disciples that faith has both private and corporate dimensions. As a Christian community our ‘common prayer’ is to have more faith in order to sustain us, and in order for us to grow together as the body of Christ.

Though no matter how strong our faith may be, there will be times or circumstances that present in our lives when we will struggle and yearn to have more faith to pull us through, and

during these tumultuous times of little faith, or perhaps even unbelief, the corporate faith generated by a community of believers sweeps in and lifts us out of dark waters into the presence of God.

Much of our liturgy is interwoven with threads of faith. The term liturgy comes from the ancient Greek word *Leitourgia*, (pronounced **lac-tor-gee-ah**) which translates as ‘work of the people.’ We come together for corporate worship as a community of faith, and we affirm the tenets of our faith when we recite in unison the Nicene Creed. This acclamation of our faith evokes a strong sense of unity and communion as one body in Christ. But, the most profound portion of our liturgy takes place when we partake in the Holy Communion, or the Thanksgiving – a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. When we receive the form or sign of the body and blood (bread and wine) in FAITH, we receive also the spiritual body and blood of Christ, and the precise nature of the presence is a mystery of faith. The holy sacrament is an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us and ordained by Christ.”

So many things in the world today are quantified, analyzed, and compartmentalized, so that when we speak of the mystery of faith tension can arise between temporal things of the world and the mystery, which is what Christ calls us to. However, each time as a community of faith, that we take part in the foretaste of the heavenly banquet – I am always encouraged by the love, humility and the holy mystery that is as evident as the faithful approach the communion rail – a place where we are all one, we are equal in the sight of God. Too often the mores and societal influences of our world dictate who we are to be, how we are to do things, the haves and the have nots, and the list goes on. But during this holy moment, we are free from all worldly influences as we enter the sacred space of the presence of Christ. What a profound gift and blessing that we are endowed with. When we walk by faith it can often lead us to places we would never expect

to go. Allow me to share the following story that illustrates a walk of faith that exemplifies the abiding grace of our loving God.

Allow me to close with a story.

An African American couple went to an Episcopal church one Sunday morning. They were the only people of color there. The woman had become an Episcopalian after reading C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, finding the logic of his faith profoundly compelling. Her fiancé was then studying to become ordained as a Baptist preacher.

But there they were on America's segregated Sabbath, the only couple of color at an Episcopal Church service of Holy Communion according to the 1928 Book of Common Prayer.

When the time came for communion the woman, who was confirmed, went up to receive. The man, who had never been in an Episcopal Church, and who had only vaguely heard of Episcopalians, stayed in his seat. As he watched how communion was done, he realized that everyone was drinking real wine — out of the same cup.

The man looked around the room, then he looked at his fiancée, then he sat back in the pew as if to say, "This ought to be interesting."

The priest came by uttering these words as each person received the consecrated bread: *The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving.*

Would the priest really give his fiancée communion from the common cup? Would the next person at the rail drink from that cup, after she did? Would others on down the line drink after her from the same cup?

The priest came by speaking these words to each person as they drank from the cup: *The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee, and be thankful.*

The people before her drank from the cup. *The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ....* Another person drank. *Preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life.* The person right before her drank. *Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee....* Then she drank. *And be thankful.* She drank. Now was the moment her fiancé was waiting for. Would the next person after her drink from that cup? He watched. The next person drank. *The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee....* And on down the line it went, people drinking from the common cup after his fiancée, like this was the most normal thing in the world.

The man would later say that it was that reconciling experience of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist that brought him into The Episcopal Church and that he had evangelism. He said, "Any Church in which blacks and whites drink out of the same cup knows something about the Gospel that I want to be a part of." That couple later married and gave birth to two children, one of whom is our 27th Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. (Story borrowed from Bishop Michael Curry's address at his installation as 27th presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church).

We are Gods' children, all of us. We are God's baptized children. We are here to change the world with the power of faith and love.

As we come to the communion rail today, I encourage each of you to come with an open heart and an open mind as we partake in the foretaste of the heavenly banquet, as faithful disciples walking the journey of life and of faith together – step by step – loving one another and encouraging while holding fast to the power of faith through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

