Walk of Faith

October 24, 2019

Deut 30:11-16

I Cor. 9:24-27; Phil. 2:12-13; 3:12-14; 2 Pet. 1:5-11 (Responsive Reading 675, Perseverance)

This morning I want to take a look at faith, particularly at some of the ways we are called to walk by faith as individuals and as a community of faith. The seeds for this message came to me while singing a hymn at presbytery a few weeks ago, and also from an observation shared by our presbytery guest speaker. But as I spent time narrowing down those seed ideas, it became clear that faith, in general, is a vast topic and has been the subject of countless sermons, hymns and books. I even thought about putting together a compilation of top faith verses to instruct, deepen, and encourage you on your faith walk. But where would I begin, and what would I leave out? So no handout today, just some musings about the faith that brings each of us here. And that is my assumption – that faith is the reason we are here together. It’s God’s gift to us, so let’s look at what the bible says about waking, working, stirring and sharing our faith.

***Waking***

There are several verses, including the opening sentences of scripture in today’s bulletin that call our faith to be awake. Do you recall the waking of your faith? We don’t do very well at sharing our faith stories with each other, so I don’t know many details of what made your faith wake up. Most of you probably had glimmers of faith awaking while in your youth. Maybe you grew up in the faith and have never known a time of not believing. Maybe you had a parent or grandparent that made sure you went to church and Sunday School, or you tagged along with a friend. Or perhaps you had a sudden, life-changing conversion experience. Whatever your story, I bet you can recall some glimmers sprinkled along the way that whispered “wake up” to your faith.

One of my glimmers came when I was ten years old. We lived in a quiet neighborhood in Bellevue, Washington, and my parents were in the midst of divorcing, so it wasn’t a happy time in my life. While riding my bike after school one day I heard music coming from the church at the top of the hill, a few doors away from our house. I don’t know what church it was. I had only been to church a handful of times, when visiting my grandparents in Oregon. Though the song I heard wasn’t familiar, something about that music called me closer, so I found a side door and slipped in, where I found a huge organ and a kind organist who indulged my curiosity, answered my questions and played several more verses of the hymn that drew me in. When I look back at that experience, I can tell you that something in the music reached through my sadness and gave me peace, wrapping me in a sense that God loved and cared for me. What I can’t tell you is what the song was. I have no idea. But whenever I hear a certain hymn, I get a glimmer. We sang it at presbytery, and we sang it this morning. *Holy, Holy, Holy –* whether played on a magnificent pipe organ or a guitar, this soaring melody always makes me think of that day in that church, waking up to someone bigger than me, to faith.

***Working***

While we acknowledge that faith is a gift from God, we also need to remember that it has a ‘me-us’ component; that we are called to act out our faith, to work it. This brings me to the observations from presbytery. Our presenter, Jason, shared some statistics about the church: 2/3 of churches are stagnant or shrinking; average attendees only come 50% of the time; and only 37% of members attend regularly. As I look around, I see a lot of us who have put in many years here. Most of my adult life has been lived as a member of this church. I joined when I was 23, and now I’m 64 and retired. We know our church isn’t growing. We might not be ready to admit that we are heading in the opposite direction, but think about where we’ll be in 10 or 15 years – or *if* we’ll be. And so today, I ask you: what must we do to be working out our faith?

It’s not clear to me what the next phase of my life will look like or how much it might change, but what is clear is that individually and as a church we need to take a fresh look at where God is calling us and to discern our part in making it happen. Sometimes I look back at where I’ve been only to realize that I keep making the same plans and goals without actually doing the work to make them happen. How depressing is that! In a nutshell, I have good intentions but…well, I think you know how the rest of that saying goes. Can anyone else here relate with me? And sometimes I look back at the many that have passed away or moved away, and mourn what used to be. Of course, there can be value at looking back to where we’ve been if we actually learn from the past. But beware of becoming like the athletes Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 9:26, self-absorbed and distracted, running aimlessly or boxing at the air for a prize that won’t last. Instead, Paul encourages self-discipline and focus that will actually lead us to what really matters, to the prize that lasts forever. Think of it as putting our focus where it needs to be and returning to square one. In his devotional, *Living the Message,* Eugene Peterson writes that we need to simplify, to *return to Square One, which is to adore God and listen to God, to learn to live by faith…*w*e need to return to Square One for a fresh start as often as every morning, noon and night.*

To adore God and listen to God is to spend time with God. It’s a relationship that is two-sided, where we are called to put some work into our faith, because we *should* have a stake in it. The Message paraphrase of Philippians 2:12-13 puts it this way: *…redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God’s energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.*

* Question: As a church, what is our stake in our faith?
* Question: How are we working out our faith individually, and as a church?

Further, as we put some work into our faith, listen to how Paul describes it in Philippians 3 – we are to Forget what is behind, to Press on, to Strain toward what is ahead, to Take Hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.  In other words, we need to Follow Hard!

* Question: What good things (and bad things) do we need to put behind us?
* Question: How, as individuals and a church, are we following Christ?

And, not surprisingly, Peter – that rash, brash, walk-on-water-Lord, I’ll-never deny-you apostle – has some thoughts on faith, maybe learned from his own school of hard-knocks: 2 Peter 1:5-11 *For this very reason (*that God gives us everything we need*), make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;  and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.  For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.  But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.*

*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

* Question: Where are you/we effective and productive in your/our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? Why? (qualities of faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, love)
* Question: Where are you/we ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? Why? (qualities of faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, love)

In the classic devotional by Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, Chambers has this to say about working out our salvation: *“Add” means there is something we have to do. We are in danger of forgetting that we cannot do what God does, and that God will not do what we can do. We cannot save ourselves nor sanctify ourselves, God does that; but God will not give us good habits, he will not give us character, he will not make us walk aright. We have to do all that ourselves, we have to work out the salvation God has worked in. “Add” means to get into the habit of doing things, and in the initial stages it is difficult. To take the initiative is to make a beginning, to instruct yourself in the way you have to go.*

* Question: What good habits and character do we need to add?

***Stirring***

As we wake to and work out our faith, we should also be prepared for events and experiences that come along to shake our faith. Within this room we’ve known our share of illnesses, death, suffering, bad decisions and consequences, even unspoken shame. Sometimes, we even fall asleep with discouragement, indifference and a ho-hum Christian contentment and our faith becomes a ‘Sunday’ thing that is absent from every other day of the week. It happens to individuals, it happens to churches. Other churches have been where we are now, shaken and stirred. Though we have a few weeks to go, there is a traditional prayer used as the Advent season approaches, and it goes like this: "Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people, that they, bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by you be richly rewarded: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

This is a prayer for God to stir up our wills, so that we might get on with doing the good works that he has planned for us to do. 1 Peter 5:10 says: And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

* Question: What is exciting, or stirs me up, about my/our faith?
* Question: Are we ready to ask the Holy Spirit to stir up and disturb us, to revive and renew us?

***Sharing***

If our faith and our witness are to have any impact in our community, we must first be willing to share them with each other. Proverbs 27:17 says, *As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.*  So how do we sharpen who we are? Eugene Peterson says, *We do it in relationship with others. One person encounters another, and there is an interchange of thoughts, feelings, ideas, and values. There’s little growth in isolation. Isolated from others, we become dull. Our thinking is blunted as well as our feelings. And with our feelings, our faith, our hope, our love. The only way to remedy that is to routinely rub up against another person, in spite of the heat it may generate or the sparks that my fly.* Notice that he doesn’t say that we will find agreement in everything – on the contrary, we can expect some fireworks! I know we don’t all vote the same or think the same, but the God who called us here today is the same one who calls us into this body, to spur one another on toward love, toward good deeds, toward meeting together, and toward encouraging one another (Heb. 10:24).

I recently read a book called *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She’s Sorry,* by Fredrik Backman*.*  The story is told from Elsa’s point of view. Elsa is seven years old and different. Her grandmother is seventy-seven years old and crazy—as in standing-on-the-balcony-firing-paintball-guns-at-strangers crazy. She is also Elsa’s best, and only, friend. According to Granny, every seven year old deserves a superhero. That’s just how it is. According to Elsa, Granny’s superpowers are saving lives…and driving people nuts. One of Elsa’s gifts is that she sees the quality in other people that is their superpower. As the story unfolds Elsa goes on a treasure hunt, guided by letters Granny left for her to deliver. As she gets more involved with her all-too-human neighbors, Elsa finds redeeming qualities in even the 'horrible' characters. She finds a way to view everyone’s differences as their strengths, even if those differences stem from illness or heartbreak or places of weakness. Elsa sees them as superpowers.

It took Elsa a while to sort out the superpowers of the other characters and see how they all work together. The story reminds me that as a body of believers, we often forget that each of us has a superpower, *and* a Superhero! Our superpowers are also known as a gift of the Spirit, and working through these gifts is the super-natural power of the Holy Spirit. Even our weaknesses can’t hold back this power. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says, But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

As God leads us to step out and share our faith in our community, let us remember that we are called to do this together, with gifts and the help of the Holy Spirit, as a praying and serving community. Ryan can’t do it alone. The elders can’t do it alone. The deacons can’t do it alone. The members can’t do it alone. We can let it slide for 10 or 15 years and see what happens. Or, as Eugene Peterson observes, we can come together now as the body of Christ, seeking to become what we are called to be. *We become what we are called to be by praying. And* (as we did last week) *we start out by praying from the belly of the fish.*