

**A Sermon Preached
at
St. George's Madrid
by
The Reverend Canon John W. Kilgore, M.D.
6 October 2019
XVI Trinity
Proper 22
Lamentations 1: 1-6
Psalm 137
Timothy 1: 1-14
Luke 17: 5-10**

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

In this exchange between Jesus and the apostles, they must have been having a hard time. In the several preceding chapters of Luke's gospel Jesus has given them some pretty tough stuff — have no fear; do not be anxious; you must be ready; I came to bring not peace but division; repent or perish; the door is narrow and few will be saved; the cost of discipleship is high; and a number of parables, some more difficult to interpret and internalize than others. So the apostles, perhaps, were having a hard time and they petitioned Jesus, "Increase our faith!"

Ever felt that way? Every wanted to have just a little more faith? To believe better, to believe more, to be more sure? I think we have all been there. It is very natural. A passage in the book of Hebrews defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. I think we all want to have a better faith, but it is hard. In this line of work as a priest, it is not uncommon to have people relate stories of faith, why they believe, things that are not explainable by our understanding of the world and how it works. Certainly not explainable by scientific reason.

Just this week, at the British Benevolent Society event someone related to me the story of a mother dying in childbirth many years ago. An event not really that uncommon, even today. But this was before the time of ultrasound, when one could not know the child's sex before being born. When the suddenly widowed husband called his mother-in-law to tell her the sex of the child, and the unfortunate death of the mother, she said, "You don't have to tell me, she has already been here..." She had had a visit from the dying woman, her daughter... This was followed by a couple of other stories about people impossibly knowing of someone's dying, or of unexplained appearances. Over the years a number of my patients have related to me their near death experiences, and the peace and tranquility they experienced. The other night a woman told me about her out of body experience and said it was 'bliss, that's the only way to describe it was bliss!' and said she would not be unhappy to have it again. And said that she is very at peace.

There is clearly something we cannot explain. Something bigger than us. I fear that organized religion has drawn a box around the definition of faith and what a life of faith is supposed to look

like. I think God is bigger than that, and we underestimate God's power, and that indeed, like the apostles, we can have our faith increased. And want to...

There is a great book that I have read called *The Book of Joy*. It is by a famous author Douglas Abrams, who chronicles a week of time together as a retreat with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama and them talking about faith and how that results in joy. It is a great read and outlines common lessons learned by two giants of faith in the world alive today. It is actually worth teaching a course on, and certainly worth your time to read. I can't begin to do justice to the lessons of the book here but at one point the two are talking about people who have a special kind of generosity: the generosity of the spirit.

The author describes the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu by saying, "The quality they both have, perhaps more than any other, is this generosity of the spirit. They are big-hearted, magnanimous, tolerant, broad-minded, patient, forgiving, and kind." And then he quotes Archbishop Tutu describing a 'way of being in the world': "becoming an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that ripples out to all of those around us." He goes on to say that when we radiate a generous spirit we are easy to be with and fun to be with. We radiate happiness, and our very company can bring joy to others...this no doubt goes hand in hand with the ability to be less self-centered, less self-regarding, and more self-forgetful.

At another point in the book Abrams is talking about generosity being an outgrowth of compassion and points out how generosity of spirit is prescribed by almost every religious tradition. And he further cites scientific evidence about brain chemistry changes associated with generosity. But most importantly he says that "Generosity is often something that we learn to enjoy by doing."

And so I would like to suggest that we increase our faith by walking it, by living it, and by acting with compassion and generosity and justice. Habits become ingrained and moods are contagious. As the Dalai Lama points out, "Much depends on your attitude. If you are filled with negative judgment and anger, then you will feel separate from other people. You will feel lonely. But if you have an open heart and are filled with trust and friendship, even if you are physically alone, even living a hermit's life, you will never feel lonely." He talks about the fact that we are social animals and that cooperation and trust are necessary. "The only thing that will bring happiness is affection and warmheartedness."

I wonder how often we act otherwise? How often do we criticize rather than endorse and support? Habits become ingrained and moods are contagious. What are our behavioural norms? If generosity is something we enjoy by doing, faith is something we increase by walking, and being big-hearted, magnanimous, tolerant, broad-minded, patient, forgiving, and kind. Habits become ingrained and moods are contagious.

There is a famous Cherokee Indian Legend which goes like this. An old Indian Grandfather had a conversation with his grandson, who came to him with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice, "Let me tell you a story. I too, at times, have felt a great hate for those who have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. It is like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die. I have struggled with these feelings many times." He continued, "It is as if there are two wolves inside me. One is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him, and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way. But the

other wolf, ah! He is full of anger. The slightest thing will set him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his hate and anger are so great. It is helpless anger for his anger will change nothing. Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit.”

The boy looked intently into his Grandfather’s eyes and asked, “Which one wins, Grandfather?”

The grandfather smiled and quietly said, “The one I feed.”

What do we feed? What behaviour do we model? How do we live into our lives of faith?

Richard Rohr, that great Franciscan priest and spiritual advisor whom I have quoted here before says, ‘You do not think yourself into a new way of living, you live yourself into a new way of thinking.’

Likewise we live ourselves into a new level of faith. Which part of ourselves are we feeding?

Amen.