

Faith is a Gift of God

John 6: 56-69

I had reached the point of exasperation. What could be that difficult about replacing a sprinkler head? Since I got divorced I was encountering a whole host of tasks that now fell to me for which I had had no prior experience. The house I was trying to sell had a manual sprinkling system which meant that whenever one wanted to water which in a desert climate was quite often, one had to lift the manhole cover and turn on the water at the main. Next with a metal doo hickey one had to turn on a valve which released water to different areas of sprinklers. It was getting dark. I had dug around the area where the water line was and unscrewed the old sprinkler head and screwed on the new one. But each time I went over to turn the water on to that area, no water would come out of the head I replaced. Had I not screwed it on tight enough? What was the deal? Was there a leak in the water line that meant there was not enough pressure? Why did everything have to be so complicated? About that time, two young men in white shirts and black pants with name tags came walking up. "Do you need any help?" Mormon missionaries never looked so good.

These young men were friendly, funny and extremely helpful. We got drenched, talked and continued to be mystified by the sprinkler head's refusal to cooperate. Even though I shared I was a Presbyterian minister, they didn't seem to lose interest in the sprinkler project. In fact, they even checked back the next day to see if they could be of further help. I finally took the sprinkler head back to the hardware store and discovered that it was faulty. In fact, there was no hole drilled in the metal tube for the water to come out.

I thought a lot about this encounter with these Mormon missionaries. I felt they had witnessed to their faith. They shared who they were with me, they met me where I was and helped me with a real need. They continued to care about me even though I showed no interest in hearing their religious views. I reflected back to my own experience as an enthusiastic teenager part of an evangelistic mission group. We descended in droves upon the Whataburger, one of the local hang outs with our religious tracts outlining the steps to salvation. My memory is of knocking on car windows and asking if I could share something

with them. Pulling out my little booklet and beginning my spiel, every person I tried to talk to quickly rolled up their window. It's probably a good thing to be willing to talk about one's faith but there might be better ways to go about it than knocking on car windows.

How is it that we come to have faith in God and in Jesus Christ? It has a whole lot more to do with God's activity and less about ours than we realize. Some folks cannot remember a time when they have not believed in God. Others can trace back the origins of their faith to a dramatic experience with the Holy Spirit. But no matter how we come to faith, God takes the initiative and by grace we are led to believe. Philip Yancey has said that justice is getting what you deserve, mercy is not getting what you deserve and grace is absolutely getting what you do not deserve.

God does not manipulate people into doing what they would otherwise not do. Faith is a gift and upon the realization of the immensity of the gift bestowed upon us, we respond with gratitude. Some will say that if you repent and believe, God will bless you. In the Reformed tradition, we affirm that it is because God has blessed us that we are able to repent, believe and serve.

Jesus knew that there were some who would believe and others who would not. Many of those who had followed him up to a certain point turned back as the way became more difficult. Peter got it right when he realized that Christ spoke words of eternal life. Even though Peter, too would later betray Christ, he was able to recognize the importance of choosing to follow the One who offered the bread of heaven.

If we want to be able to share our faith, I believe we must always be ready to share the hope which we have in the Gospel. But learning to share our faith is not something which can be packaged or programmed. Our sharing emerges out of our relationship with God through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is vital and alive and uniquely expressed through who we are.

Although we like to be able to take credit for the good work we do or our own faith, today's lesson would remind us that we are not the ones in control. Human beings are more

comfortable with the rational- that which can be explained by science or mathematics. It follows that if we are able to understand something, then we are able to control it.

But coming to faith through the movement of God's grace in our lives reminds us that there is nothing one can do to earn such a gift- we can never be good enough. Salvation is a gift and out of our control.

But what is within our power to control is our power to choose. When Andrew Jackson was president, he pardoned a man on death row, but the man refused to accept the pardon. Prison authorities, the Attorney General of the United States, and other people tried to convince the prisoner to accept the pardon, but he refused. The Attorney General consulted the United States Supreme Court about forcing the prisoner to accept the pardon. The court ruled, though, that the pardon was merely a printed statement until the man accepted it.

I believe that we witness to our faith when we are open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we build relationships with others by helping them fix a broken sprinkler head or a broken heart. I have a Korean friend in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She witnesses to her faith by starting inviting other Korean women to her home to cook together and share their lives. Many are not Christian. But as they share their lives, gradually these women have come to ask Choon about where she finds her strength and hope. Then she is able to share the Good News. As we search for truth and reach out in the darkness, we realize that Christ has been walking with us even before we realized it. When as believers we strive to share the good news which we have experienced, let us always remember that God does not coerce us into faith. That is the nature of grace. We can accept or reject God's offer of bread for the journey. Today let us rejoice in the incredible gift of faith which we have been given and joyfully share the love of Christ with others!!

Preached by the Reverend Janet Riley on "Bring a Friend Sunday" August 23, 2009

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