

HAVE FAITH!

(10/22/2023)

Scripture Lessons: Lamentations 1:1-6
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:1-6

“Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” (2 Timothy 1:6)

“The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’” (Luke 17:5)

This past week several people said they liked the quote I shared about becoming a seeker that was written by Peter Matthiessen. I would like to share it again this morning because it speaks to me on a deep level and because I had some thoughts about it this past week.

In Matthiessen’s book, *In Search of the Snow Leopard*, which describes his journey through Tibet in search of this rare creature, Matthiessen calls our attention to the sense of mystery we had as a child, to how this sense of mystery and the response of awe becomes dulled or lost, and to how our realization that something precious is missing in our lives can lead to a search that we would describe as the spiritual journey. He writes,

Soon the child’s clear eye is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. Simple free being becomes encrusted with the burdensome armor of the ego. Not until years later does an instinct come that a vital sense of mystery has been withdrawn. The sun glints through the pines, and the heart is pierced in a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise. After that day . . . we become seekers.

I think of my grandson, Miles, and my granddaughter, Emerson, every time I read this—and I tear up. I think not only of what they will gain, but also what they will lose as they grow up, as they become educated and socialized adults. And I hope that later in life, perhaps in some unexpected way, when they realize that they have become separated from a vital sense of Mystery, from the original Unity, they will become seekers.

As you know, I am a big fan of the metaphor of the search. I like to think of myself as a searcher, as a seeker. As the American writer Walker Percy has said,

The search is what everyone would undertake if they were not sunk in the everydayness of their own life. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Nor to be onto something is to be in despair.

I agree with Percy that the answer to the problem of existential despair is not fundamentalism, but The Search. However, this past week I came upon another quote by Matthiessen. Here it is:

*Yak-butter tea and wind pictures,
the Crystal Mountain,
and blue sheep dancing on the snow—it's quite enough!
Have you seen the snow leopard?
No!
Isn't that wonderful?*

Let's think about what Matthiessen is telling us. First, I have to admit that yak-butter tea is an acquired taste—but I really came to like it, especially on bitterly cold days when we were circumambulating Mt. Kailas, the sacred mountain in Tibet. And the wind, stirring up the dust of the Tibetan plateau as well as the mists of the valleys, does create eerie wind pictures. I can picture the Crystal Mountain, the sacred meeting place of heaven and earth, with blue sheep dancing on the snow. Matthiessen is correct—it is quite enough!

But that wasn't why Matthiessen came to Tibet! That wasn't the object of his search. He went to Tibet in search of the snow leopard—and he never saw one. Like Matthiessen, I also was unsuccessful in my quest for a glimpse of this mystical creature during my two trekking pilgrimages through northwestern Nepal and the Tibetan plateau. This makes the ending of his poem or Zen koan so confusing to me:

*Have you seen the snow leopard?
No!
Isn't that wonderful?*

Matthiessen never found the object of his search—and that was wonderful? When I first read this, I was confused. I would have thought that Matthiessen, like me, would be disappointed that the search had ended in failure.

Then I recalled a passage near the end of Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*. Siddhartha, who has experienced enlightenment by the river where he and Vasudeva lived and worked as ferrymen, the river that taught them about impermanence, interconnectedness, the Unity, and the unreality of time, is unexpectedly reunited with his childhood friend, Govinda. Govinda, who embarked upon the search with Siddhartha when, as young men, they left their privileged status as sons of Brahman priests to become wandering ascetics, left Siddhartha to become one of the monks of Gautama, the Buddha. Now Govinda engages the elderly ferryman in conversation, not knowing that the person with whom he speaks is really his childhood friend. Siddhartha immediately recognizes his friend, though both of them have changed through the years.

Govinda, who realizes that the old ferryman with whom he is speaking is not only “a seeker of the true path,” but one who seems to have found it, asks Siddhartha to tell him

something of what he has learned in his journeys. Siddhartha responds by noting that Govinda, who wears the robe of the monks of Gautama, must also be a seeker.

“It is true I am old,” said Govinda, “but I have still not stopped seeking. I will never stop seeking—this seems to be my nature. You, too, as it seems to me, have also been a seeker. Will you not tell me something about it, your reverence?”

Siddhartha said: “What should I have to tell you, venerable one? Perhaps that you seek overmuch? That you seek so much you do not find?”

“How is that?” asked Govinda.

“When someone seeks,” said Siddhartha, “it can easily happen that his eyes only see the thing he is seeking and that he is incapable of finding anything, incapable of taking anything in, because he is always only thinking about what he is seeking, because he has an object, a goal, because he is possessed by this goal. Seeking means having a goal, but finding means being free, open, having no goal. Perhaps you, venerable one, are indeed a seeker, for in striving after your goal, there is much you fail to see that is right before your eyes.”

I think Siddhartha answers our question concerning why Matthiessen is so excited about not being able to find that which he sought. When we seek something, we begin by realizing that we do not have it. It is somewhere else. When we find it, we will be happy, enlightened, fulfilled. But what if we already have that which we seek? What if it is right before our eyes every day? Yak-butter tea, wind pictures, the Crystal Mountain, and blue sheep dancing on the blue snow. Then comes the great realization: “It is enough.” We don’t need more!

We don’t need the snow leopard, the mystical experience of enlightenment. It is enough to sit by the river, to have it teach us, and to let it help us find ways that we can help other people. Strange as it may seem, it is because we *don’t* find the snow leopard, that which we sought, that we realize the deeper truth about the search—that that which we seek is already with us, is within us, is among us. All we have to do is open our eyes!

BTW, Darlene can be annoying at times! When I casually mention the possibility of a return trip to Tibet, she reminds me that the first time I served as unintentional host to an intestinal bug that resulted in a loss of 26 pounds in a month, and the second time, possibly due to high altitude trekking, I came back with a paralyzed diaphragm and a collapsed lung. She also reminds me of what the Zen master, Dogen, has said:

If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?

Or Robert M. Pirsig, who wrote *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, one of my favorite books,

The only Zen you find on the tops of mountains is the Zen you bring up there.

Or Jesus, who tells us,

The kingdom of God is within you.

She reminds me that there is an inner Mt. Kailas as well as an outer Mt. Kailas, and she thinks that at this stage in my life it would be a good idea for me to focus more on the inner than the outer. As I said, she can be annoying, but I have to admit that she has a point!

Like Govinda, I will always be a seeker; it appears to be my nature. Perhaps I (or we) need to learn how to seek without seeking, see without looking, hear without listening, and discover without searching. Then we will find the inner Mt. Kailas, the inner Center of the universe, the God who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves!

This leads us back to our scripture lessons this morning. The three scripture readings are about faith. Each is illustrative of a slightly different aspect of faith. Each speaks its message to us as Christians as we seek to strengthen our faith and to live faith-filled lives.

Many years ago, I ran across a quote by the Methodist theologian, John Wesley. In an attempt to distinguish faith from belief, Wesley said, "Faith is not a belief or any system of beliefs, no matter how true those beliefs may be."

I agree with Wesley: belief and faith are different. Within a religious context, I think of a belief as an understanding, as a way of thinking. Beliefs are obviously important to our spiritual journey, but they are not the same as faith.

For example, I believe that Jesus of Nazareth, whom we proclaim to be the Christ, is an incarnation of the Word of God. I also, by the way, believe that all of us are incarnations of God's creative Spirit; I do not believe the Incarnation was a singular historical event. I believe that God is a creative power not only in our lives and in our world but also in the entire universe. I believe that God not only calls us forth into fullness of life; God gives us the resources we need to live this life in a healthy, beautiful, and joyous way. I believe that God is present as a healing power within us and within all people, and that this healing power can be strengthened through prayer. I believe that no matter where we go in life or what we do, we are never separated from God's redeeming love.

What we believe is important. Our religious beliefs are important resources to us in the living of our lives. They point us in a certain direction. They make us aware of certain resources from which we can draw in the living of our lives. They frame our understanding of God, ourselves, and life.

Our beliefs also influence the way we respond to other people. For example, if we believe that Christ is present in even the most despised of people, in “the least of these,” it will have a formative influence on our response to people we might otherwise condemn and despise. If we believe that all sentient beings are not only created by God, are not only children of God, but are unique incarnations of God’s creative Spirit (as I do), how can we be justified in being prejudiced against someone because of the color of that person’s skin, their ethnic background, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs?

This belief was a cornerstone of Mother Theresa’s ministry to those who lay dying in the streets of Calcutta. Mother Theresa not only believed that she was ministering to these poor souls *in the name of Christ*; she believed that she and her fellow workers were *actually ministering to Christ!* If we believed that, if we really believed that, can you see how it would shape our response to everyone we meet in our daily lives?

If Wesley is correct in his assertion that faith is different from belief, how can we understand faith and its role in our lives? While a belief is an understanding about God, I believe faith is the quality of our relationship with God. I believe it is our relationship with God that grounds us, that transforms us, that heals us, that saves us--not our understanding of God! This is why in preparation for sharing in the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the first Sunday of every month, we spend a few moments talking with Jesus. As we talk openly and honestly with Jesus, we strengthen our relationship with him. And I believe that it is faith that makes it possible for us to actually experience the presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

The first of our scripture lessons from the lamentations of Jeremiah is the beginning of the lament over Jerusalem following its destruction by the Chaldeans in 587 B.C.E. Once the center of the nation and religion of Israel, the powerful, majestic city is reduced to rubble as a punishment for its transgressions.

What does this have to do with faith? First, the Israelites had faith that that which was torn down could be rebuilt. In this sense, faith gives rise to hope. They realized that, though they had broken their covenant with God, they could never sever that relationship. The passage is a lesson about our response to tragedy. When our outer center, that around which we built our

lives is destroyed, we need to find the grounding of our faith within. We need to find or rediscover that spark of light, that seed of faith that is already present within us.

In the second scripture lesson, from Paul's second letter to Timothy, Paul speaks a word of encouragement to his younger colleague. He tells Timothy, "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you" (1:6). He tells Timothy to "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us" (1:14)

Paul reminds Timothy that God has given us a gift, the gift of faith, the gift of presence, the gift of the Holy Spirit. God has entrusted the "good treasure" to us. God has planted a spark of light within us. Though at times this spark may appear to have dimmed, it is an eternal flame. It simply needs to be rekindled and tended. It cannot be extinguished, even through the experience of death.

The third scripture lesson, from the Gospel of Luke, begins with a common everyday problem, the problem of forgiveness. The disciples want to know what Jesus expects with regard to forgiveness. Jesus tells them that if someone sins against you seven times in a day and repents seven times for what he/she has done, "you must forgive."

The disciples are shocked at his answer! This sounds impossible! Almost immediately, however, they realize Jesus would not ask them to do something that is impossible. They then turn their attention to the resources they need to become a forgiving person. Their response indicates they understand the dynamics of forgiveness. *They ask Jesus to increase their faith!*

The disciples know intuitively that the answer to the problem of forgiveness is faith! The answer to the problem of fear is faith! The answer to the problem of despair is faith! The answer to the questions which spring to our lips when a loved one experiences a serious illness is faith! The answer to the problem of death is faith!

If faith is the quality of our relationship with God, then to increase our faith we need only to deepen our relationship with God. As we do this, we take on the heart and mind of Jesus. When we take on the heart and mind of Jesus, forgiveness is not a problem; acceptance of the life which has been given to us to live is not a problem, even when this life is not what we would have chosen.

Faith is not a substance which can be quantified. It is not something that we humans have or don't have, or that some people have, and other people don't have. It is the quality of our relationship with God. Jesus tells the disciples they do not need to be given more faith.

They already have enough. They have been given all they need. They simply need to live the faith they have. Jesus says,

If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey you. (Luke 17:6)

There are times in our lives when we feel close to God, when we experience the presence of Christ. There are also times in our lives when we feel alone, when we experience what St. John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul.” We remember the promises of God, but it is difficult to trust these promises. During these times, our doubt may seem stronger than our faith.

Jesus tells us we do not need more faith. We already have all the faith that we need! God has planted a seed within our hearts, the seed of faith. It may be small like a grain of mustard seed, but it can grow into a mighty tree! This is because it is a living gift! Like the yeast that filled the entire loaf, when we allow our faith to grow, we will live faith-full, faith-filled lives.

In the words of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen” (Heb. 11:1). This is what keeps us going when the path lies dark before us. Though we cannot see what lies ahead, we know we do not walk this path alone. This is not just a belief; it can be an experience if we see through the eyes of faith!

Faith has been described as the opening of our soul to God. This opening allows God to enter, to heal, to transform. In the words of the apostle Paul, let us rekindle our faith in our worship as the gathered church, in our prayer life, and as we open our minds and hearts to the many ways that we become conscious of God’s presence in our lives. Faith helps us experience the presence of our Lord both within and among us. When we experience this, there is nothing that is impossible for us as individuals and as a church!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

When we think about faith, we realize that faith is not only the quality of our relationship with God; it is also the quality of our relationship with the world, with other people, with life, with all of God's creation. Faith is not an end in itself. Faith is dynamic! It leads us to reach out to the world in love.

As the writer of the New Testament Letter of James has said,

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose, he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

James is telling us that every generous act of giving is our expression, our sharing of the gift that God has given us. God's "word of truth" leads us to open our hearts and our hands to others.

If we have faith, faith as a grain of mustard seed, we can't turn our back on those in need. As James tells us,

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

I would say that faith, if it does not find expression in caring, compassionate, loving outreach to the world is not dead; it is not faith.

It is in this spirit that we dedicate our gifts to this church, to its mission outreach, and the many gifts we share with each other, with our families, and with the world.