

"KEEPING THE FAITH"

INTRODUCTION

A man recently made his way to the southwest corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue to visit the main building of the New York Public Library. He passed the lions that keep their vigil at the gates, climbed the marble stairs that would do justice to any palace, walked between the two towering renaissance pillars and on through the doors. He was ill-prepared for what greeted him immediately on the inside: busts of notable benefactors, glass covered display cases, stamp collections hanging from the walls, a store, rest-rooms, check-rooms, telephones, stairs and elevators. Finally, in a dark mood of rising desperation, he turned to a staff member near by and asked: "Where do they keep the books?"

DEVELOPMENT

To some outsiders and also to some insiders, I'm sure that there are times when our churches seem like a bewildering assortment of unrelated projects, activities and concerns. What one is likely to see when he or she comes to this church depends on the day and on the hour and the door through which one passes.

People can be forgiven for coming into this church building - seeing its fine school in operation five mornings a week, or its AA group meeting two nights of the week, or the gym class for women on Tuesday nights, or a group of ladies working for the church fair some afternoon, or its theater productions of other years, or its special music programs, or the Saturday morning movies for children, or a voice teacher giving singing lessons to Betsy Palmer - and asking, "Where do they keep the faith?"

What books are to a library, faith is to a church. No books, no library. No faith, no church. It's as simple as that. And because I feel that the sermons of this Fall season are helping to set the tone and establish the direction for the coming months in our church, I have chosen deliberately to talk about faith this morning - "Keeping the Faith". No faith, no church.

FAITH

The Scriptures have some tall and sturdy things to say about faith, and it's well for us to hear them again. "Without faith, it is impossible to please God". "All things are possible to him who believes". "Faith without works is dead". We're told in the Bible that faith can move mountains, that faith the size of a tiny mustard seed can nurture some tremendous reserves of hope, of love, and of courage.

It's not easy to define this elusive and desirable quality called faith. In his words to us last Sunday, Freddie Daniel spoke of faith as that "indefinable, illogical experience that keeps up men's hope and spirit when so much appears lost". Some of you perhaps like the way the writer of the Book of Hebrews defined faith. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen". Or, if you prefer a modern definition, try this one offered by a contemporary German theologian, Gerhard Ebeling. "Faith" he says, "is man's participation in God".

No matter how it is defined, it is no exaggeration to say that without faith - whatever else a church may have - it is nothing. Without faith, little can or will happen - in our churches, let alone in our lives.

I'd like to share with you today several thoughts regarding faith that I try to hold in mind as I work to keep the faith that I have.

FAITH IS MIXED WITH DOUBT

First, I would suggest that faith is always mixed with doubt. Faith and doubt, in a way, are

nourished by the same inner energies. Two sides of the same coin. Only the man who doubts can believe, and only the man who believes can doubt.

Today's scripture reading bears this out. Let's review it for a moment. Jesus and the "A" team of disciples (Peter, James and John) had gone up into the Mountain of Transfiguration. Meanwhile, the "B" team of disciples left behind on the flats below were approached by a man who wanted healing for his epileptic son. The truth of the matter is that neither team fared well. The "A" team with Jesus didn't quite know what to do up there on the mountain, and the nine disciples left behind were powerless to help the man in the valley who approached them with the request for healing for his son.

Soon Jesus came down from the mountain with the first-stringers and rejoined the "B" team and confronted the distraught father. The son's condition was very sad and upsetting. The boy had all the signs and symptoms of genuine epilepsy: spasms, foaming at the mouth, grinding of the teeth. As Jesus faced this anxious father, a soul-stirring conversation took place. It went something like this. Jesus asked the father, "How long has the boy been like this?" The father replied, "From childhood". "But Jesus....if you can - if you can do anything at all....have pity and help us". The deep anguish of the father was coming through. Then Jesus responded, "If you can.....why - all things are possible to him who believes". Immediately the father came back with one of the most honest confessions to be found anywhere in all literature. He said: "Lord, I believe; help mine unbelief"

There you see the mix of which I speak. We have here not one man saying, "Lord, I believe", and then another one saying, "Help my unbelief". We have here one man and the same man saying both things. Faith and doubt are inseparable in our lives. The man was saying, "I do have faith, but not enough. Help me".

Often it's this way in our lives. We have moments of faith, and we also have those other moments when we aren't quite so sure, moments of doubt. We're like the young man who came here a little over a year ago, started attending church, and then wanted to join. I remember he said something like this to me, "I really don't know whether it's right for me to join for I have more doubts it seems than I have belief - but I want the church and I want to believe. Help me". The young man has since left the city and moved to another part of the country, but I think he was helped while he was here. But the point is that so many of us have this mix in our spiritual lives - belief and unbelief, faith and doubt. Two sides of the same coin. Life calls us to act on one or the other, to take the leap of faith or not. The choice is ours. So don't think you're different from the next person if you find this mix of faith and doubt in your life. Now-a-days, most have it.

FAITH IS ALWAYS TIED TO LIFE

The second thought I want to suggest and elaborate on is that faith is always tied to life.

History is the sphere in which faith operates. The habitat of faith is time and place. And I think it's only as life interrogates us that we know what we believe and how deeply we really believe it. Life draws this out of us. Indeed, it's only as life interrogates us that we discover the need to believe. The need to believe. The need to have faith. Perhaps you don't feel the need, at least not right now.

I got into an interesting conversation with a bright, personable young man this Summer while relaxing at our Summer place in Maine. He's a choice young man - open, intelligent, honest, stable. He's completed three years of college. His father is a bank president in Montreal. The young man has been reared in a devout

Christian home - much loved, well-supported. He told me that he's considering leaving the church in which he has been reared, that he's going through a mild crisis of faith. As we sat and talked, he confessed to this void in his life, saying, "I'm not sure that I have faith. I'm not sure that I still believe".

As he talked, I recalled in my own mind that it was along about my third year in college that I went through a mild crisis of faith, too, in my own inner life - sorting out and discarding a few things I was doubting and questioning. It's not unusual; most of us do. It then occurred to me to ask this young man a question. Speaking in love and out of genuine concern, I asked, "What would you do with more faith now if you had it?" Really, he has so few needs at present that require him to exercise much faith - a comfortable home to go to, a college education that is being financed for him, a faculty that cares about him. All things are provided for him. "What would you do with more faith now if you had it? What do you need more faith for anyway?"

If I understand the Bible correctly, there is an economy with God regarding the gift of faith. It's only as we attempt great things for God that we can expect great things from God. And if we're content to play the "money game", or the "status game", or the "pleasure game" - we really don't need faith for that. If we're only playing "nine to five 'till 65" and then a comfortable retirement, we don't need faith for that. But if, on the other hand, we are trying to move some mountain of unbelief, apathy, prejudice, injustice, hatred, or if we're trying to influence lives around - at home, at work - for good, for the higher values and achievements in life - it is then that God will give us faith. It is not the case that we get our faith all worked out intellectually - perhaps in college, or seminary, or in our homes - and then go out to apply what we have put together in life situation. That's just the beginning. We get more as we go along. Faith is tied to life.

A minister was giving a series of lectures at an institution many miles from here. This man is known as much for his honesty as for his eloquence and his intelligence. It was his candor that prompted him to end his last lecture something like this, "I'd have more to say to you on this subject if I were clearer on the resurrection. But right now, frankly, I don't believe it". Well, later on a friend on the host faculty took him to task on that statement. Reprimanding him, he said, "You shouldn't have said that. Where did you ever get the idea that you had to believe everything all the time?" He continued, "When you have to believe in the resurrection, you will!" The friend who had given the lecture said, "When will I believe in it?" His host replied, "Perhaps when you face death, or when someone you love is facing death".

Remember Job did not know how deeply he believed until his wife advised him to curse God and die. Under the provocation of that option, he found it in his soul to say, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him". We've all known some modern day Jobs; I've known some in this church. Faith is tied to life, and so often it's only as life interrogates us that we know what we really believe and how deeply we believe.

FAITH CHIEF RESOURCE IS JESUS

Another

~~The final~~ thought I want to put before you is that faith's chief resource is Jesus. We commonly think of Jesus as an object of our faith, which he is, but he is also for us the source of faith. We believe in Him, but we also believe through him and like him.

The question that ministers face as they contemplate the insufficiency of faith in our time - in themselves and in their congregations - is: "How is faith to

to be generated?" "What is it that generates faith?" To me the primary source of faith is found in Jesus. The predominant characteristic of his life was his consciousness of God. From first to last - in shine or in shadow - Jesus was conscious of God. Running through all of his parables, all of his teachings, all parts of the Lord's Prayer is this basic assumption that God is real and is active in human affairs. And as we draw near to Jesus, we find that this basic trust in God is contagious. It begins to rub off on us. You know how it is - when we associate with some people, we find ourselves drifting into dirty speech. When we associate with still others, we find ourselves laughing more. When we associate with some other people, we find ourselves becoming cynical, or materialistic. But when we begin to keep company with Jesus, we start to believe and come to realize the power of faith and what it can accomplish.

Yes, He brings us to faith. He is faith's most reliable witness, its most convincing spokesman. His life awakens faith, for he inspires us to doubt our doubts, and to believe our beliefs. So faith then does not come by exhortation, but by exposure to Jesus. And this is why it is so important for us to take the time to read the Scriptures, to avail ourselves of the Sacraments, to sense His presence in others, to be open to His spirit in the world.

CONCLUSION Let me bring it all together here in these final moments by making this observation. Just as there are individuals and groups in society today who are searching for their identity, so the church, too, I think is going through a bit of an identity crisis in its own life. Who are we anyway - we - whose work in so many ways and places is being duplicated by others, done better by others, too. Who are? Why are we here? What is our main task?

In essence, we are simply those who believe in God - through Jesus Christ. St. Paul long ago called us by this beautiful phrase - "the household of faith". Think about it. It is our faith, after all, that constitutes us as Christian people. The richness of a church is its people - and the richness of its people is their faith! ~~No faith. No church.~~ How is it with you and your faith?

OUT
The church, we know, is more than the sum of its many parts, but we must not forget that the faith of a given congregation rests ultimately on the faith of its members in particular. It's curious, but I think that most of us here in this church tend to shy away from what Karl Barth once described as the "I hymns" (hymns of a personal nature, making use of the pronoun I) (I need thee every hour; I would be true; I love to tell the story; Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine). We tend to shy away from "I-hymns" and "I-piety" forms. But Barth was also reminding us that our criticism of the I forms of faith and hymns must always be relative and never absolute, always sensitive to the fact that running through the scriptures and through centuries of the "household of faith" are those witnesses and affirmations of faith given in the first person. "The Lord is my shepherd". "This one thing I do". "I know that my redeemer liveth". "He leadeth me". We heard an eloquent expression of a man's faith last Sunday - the personal witness - and we were deeply moved. It cut through our sophistication, through our defenses and found its way into our hearts. Faith....personal....
No faith. No church.

How is it with you and your faith. ~~Is it being exposed to and enlarged by the source of faith - Jesus. Perhaps we're like the man back there who came to Jesus asking for his help. "Lord" he said, "I do have faith. But not enough. Help me".~~

PRAYER Our gracious God and father, for the gift of faith and the power to struggle with our inner doubts, we thank thee. Increase our faith, we pray, as in this fellowship we pursue together what it means to be a "household of

faith" in a demanding, oftentimes difficult and materialistic city. So inspire our speech and direct our actions that others may come to find faith through us. In the name and spirit of Jesus. Amen