

SPG#178, Pentecost 11A, Proper 12

July 27, 2008

Genesis 29:15-28

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

What is the value of your faith? As you look back over your life: all the times you have come to church, either this one or another one, all the money you have given to the church, all the time you have given in various committees, worship, and activities, all the times when you have given of your specific talents to a church. Think back in your own personal faith, all the times you prayed alone for someone or something, the times when you asked God for a personal favor. Think back to the hard times, when church was not some place you wanted to be, when you came needing and expecting love, but instead found conflict and dissension. Remember times in worship when, in the warm glow, you felt bonded in love to God and to all who were there.

I remember when the real litmus test of my faith was my own thinking about it, and how faith stood up under my criticisms, skepticisms, and doubts. It was an eye opener for me to learn to be as critical of my thinking, my skepticisms, as I was of the faith.

I remember once when I really screwed up at church. Later I was lamenting to a friend in the church how embarrassed and ashamed I felt. It dawned on me in that conversation that he loved me anyway. There have been days when I thought the burdens of being in the church were not worth it. And there have been days when I thought I would die before I left it. And in all of it I have kept on coming back.

And there has always been one more person who needed to be loved and cared for, or one more work that needed to be accomplished, or one more person who was there to love me, or one more spiritual experience that unexpectedly opened a door in my mind.

Perhaps some of that puts you to mind of experiences you have had in the church and in your life of faith. But I know myself and most of us here enough to realize that we would not be here unless we wanted to be here. It is probably easier to say, "I am here because I have always come here. I have a life of faith because I have always had a life of faith."

And so it would seem from that statement that routine, predictability, and comfort have a lot to do with having faith and being part of church. But I am suspicious of that. And I will say again that most of us would not be here unless we chose to be here.

And I am confident that if I had the chance to extensively interview each person in the church that we would eventually encounter the base of your faith that is of eternal value.

And, as much as commitments and promises are part of our lives, we are married to our spouse for a year because every day of that year we decided to stay married. We have a life of faith, and we are part of the church because of a series of daily decisions that we make continuously. Well it might strike you that for all of us to make these little decisions over and over again that there must be something here of extreme value that draws us again and again. And there must be something about the Christian faith that is equally precious, or we would not decide over and over again to have that faith, or be near that faith.

It is to this point that Jesus speaks today in the gospel from Matthew. He characterizes the beauty of a life of faith of many by calling it the “Kingdom of heaven.” And I think there are an increasing number of scholars who feel that Jesus was speaking of a life that he saw in the present tense, as well as in the future. He uses a series of metaphors to describe this life of faith, or this “Kingdom of Heaven.” The first metaphor is a tiny mustard seed which surprisingly grows into a large shrub. The second metaphor is yeast that a woman put with three measures of flour until all of it was leaved.

For the third metaphor he says, **The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.** For the fourth metaphor he says, **Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.**

In his metaphors Jesus indicates the great value of the kingdom of heaven, of the life of faith. In the last part of today’s gospel, he says that the life of faith is of such great value that those who are not part of it will, in the end, wish they were. He uses the “furnace of fire” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” to illustrate this.

All of the metaphors taken together point to an eternal and precious gold vein that is part of every faith. When we get to that level of faith we talk about selling all you have to get it, and to make sure you are near it. We talk about the necessity of having it. There is nothing routine about this pearl of great price. When we encounter this level of faith, and talk about not having it, then we look for extreme expressions that express that misery, like furnace of fire and weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In each life here, that which has brought you back to this church, back again to the life of faith that you have, is of tremendous value. And from the spiritual side of life, it is so much more precious than we can put into words. Even Jesus did not put it into direct words. He used metaphors to indicate the importance of the life of faith.

But I think it is before us to be as direct as we can in speaking of our own life of faith.

It is before us to be honest and clear about that for which we have given our lives.

Perhaps more than anyone, St. Paul had a way of referring to the preciousness of faith by speaking of the rewards of loving and being loved by God within that faith. And I think we may use his words as a model for our own expressions. He says directly and clearly in today's epistle, **For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.** Amen.