

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 7 October 2007
St. Paul's Parish, Kent
The Reverend Allen LaMontagne

A sermon based on the Revised Common Lectionary Proper 22C; HAbakkuk 1.1-4; 2.1-4; Psalm 37.1-10; 2 Timothy 1.1-14; Luke 17.5-10

I went into one of my trusty, old seminary books to research "faith," given today's gospel. The book has a scholarly name: *Some Principles of Moral Theology and Their Application*. It's by Kenneth E. Kirk..... It is old, and time-honored--copyright 1921; it is out of print. My copy is in the form of a three ring binder. It's a cherished book, a source of an important working definition of repentance which is: "To repent is to feel sorrow for, and repugnance towards, whatever grieves God." It goes on to say, "The ground from which these emotions spring must be...the *desire to be as God would have us be.*" And adds finally, "Repentance is incomplete without amendment of life." It's very much to the point, making possible even to memorize and hold onto an important spiritual principle, for repentance is not merely an occasional or seasonal discipline as much as it is a daily, constant way of living faithfully into, "*The desire to be as God would have us be;*" A sensitive and humble way to live in relationship with the One who forms us from beginning to new beginning, world without end. Amen.

So, as I revisit Kirk's book to inquire of its wisdom on the subject of *faith*, and as in the case with *repentance*, a glimmer of light appears with Kirk quoting another venerable scholar, Scarmelli: (bear in mind, the language is a bit "classical"...) "It is a remark commonly enough made, that a large proportion of Christians transgress the law of God, and lead licentious lives, because faith has become extinct in their souls.... But in reality, I do not think that this is the cause of all the evil; for as far as the substance goes there is faith; and if we sound the heart of a Catholic, no matter how loose his life may be, we shall find that there is not one article of our faith, though ever so abstruse and difficult, which he does not hold. The whole ruin of souls, then, which we deplore in the Church, proceeds not from want of faith, but *from want of thought upon the truths taught by faith....*" (emphasis mine) How does it avail us that the truths of our faith have in themselves a sovereign efficacy to remove from us every vice, to keep us far from every mortal sin, if the Christian believing in these truths, does not fix his mind upon them, never gives them any real attention, never brings them into contact with his will by seriously pondering upon them?" (91)

There's the gist of it. Pay attention to God, to God's Word. Pay attention to yourself in relation to God, and in relation to all people, rich and poor, sick and well, mean-spirited and kindly. Simply said, *We don't need MORE faith. We need to do something with the faith we have.*

It's helpful to take into consideration what prompts the disciples to ask for more faith. Here is what Jesus says in the verses just prior to what we hear today in the gospel: "Take heed of yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says,

'I repent,' you must forgive him." Probably in silence, before uttering a word in response, the disciples' minds race as they hear themselves required *to forgive one another, and others, too*. Maybe they recall the last time someone--or they themselves--do something hurtfully offensive... "Forgive? You mean, you can't just ignore someone?" "Smile at them and say, "Hello, how are you...?" not really caring what the answer is...? "No," Jesus says, "Rebuke them."

He does not say, *judge them*, as is so often the case when..."advice"...is given. In fact, we are told explicitly *not to judge*. "**Rebuke**" is not the same as "**judge**." Oh, what a difference. To rebuke is to love someone into penitence: no easy task. *This is what Jesus warns his followers against--being sanctimonious judges*. How many people have encountered "advice" from someone, a Christian probably, that smacks of barely-veiled judgment, and because of it are utterly turned off to their gospel?

"Increase our faith," is a cry for help. An admission that it is hard *to be as God would have us be*: merciful, not vindictive; peaceful, not angry as in road-enraged. Loving, not hating. It is clearer now that the Epistle reading companion to this Gospel includes the appeal, "But join with me in suffering for the Gospel, relying on the power of God." *To be as God would have us be* is anything but easy. Forgive...? Others...? Ourselves..? Thus, the importance of the phrase, "relying on the power of God."

Which brings us back to repentance as *way of life*. Repentance that stems from yearning *to be as God would have us be* is not feeling sorry for oneself, playing victim, staying too long at the pity party. Repentance is the ultimate posture of humility. **The only person who can rightly rebuke another is the genuinely penitent person.** *And most of the time, they say nothing. Their rebuke is in the form of silent and fervent prayer.* They know themselves. They appreciate both their own sinfulness and God's grace, rightly proportioned. They really don't have to say a word; just being near them makes you want to be *as God would have you be*. It's as St. Francis said: "Preach the Gospel everyday; if necessary, use words."

And that is just doing our job. It's not over-achieving to be this way, worthy of special recognition or reward. It is our duty in obedience to the Christ who suffered and suffers still on behalf of all humankind. Our reward is being with him, forgiven, as God would have us be, and not only us, but many more, waiting not to be judged, but loved. Are you loved today? Do you know God's love for you? Is the gift of faith within you, opened and appreciated? Surely you don't feel you have a lot. None of us does. We have small measure, but often an even smaller measure of appreciation for what faith can do when we apply ourselves to using it, and not merely try to obtain more of it for fear's sake that we have none.

God does not so much measure the quantity of our faith. After all, God gives us what we have, all that we need and more. Rather than focusing on quantity, God tends to the *quality of faith, our response in faith to Love*.

You and I *have* faith. It is a gift given alongside *hope* and *Love*. It is standard Christian

issue. We all get it. You don't get a star on your forehead when you discover you have it. It's nothing you or I do to get it or have it. It's a gift, and we're accountable for having it. *It's our duty to use it.* It's part of the vows we take through Baptism. God promises to be with us always. He gives us the means to believe him: faith. A question to ask then is, do we use it...enough, relying on God, or do we rely more on our money, our prestige, our accomplishments, and then on Sundays, ask for more faith, as though we used up all of what we were given before? Try using *what you have MORE*, and don't be surprised if you find yourself with more faith.

It's funny that way, faith is. It's the ancient truth. As true today as ever. God grows it in us, like a seed, watered with the tears of long-suffering, bearing with one another, living on behalf of others, *yearning to be as God would have us be:* in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.