

The Greening of Our Faith

Mark 4:1-9; Luke 17:11-19

Our Lenten theme at Grace this year is “The Greening of Our Faith.” The word “Lent” itself means “lengthening”, signifying the coming of Spring when the days lengthen with sunlight bringing new growth. So we move this season toward Spring and Easter Dawn.

A few years back I drove to the mountains during early spring and saw amid the dark green evergreen trees the light green of leaves just beginning to come out, that early spring yellow green of leaves beginning to form.

What comes to your mind as you think about the greening of your faith? The early green of a new faith? Or, of a faith rising from the dormancy of a long winter in you, rising to full color. Or the fresh planting of a brand-new faith to replace a faith that died, a faith that had to die for new faith to begin. The greening of faith is a re-birth of faith, a reconstruction of faith, faith in a new key, to use a musical analogy.

Faith is all about *life*. *Living* with all your heart, mind soul and strength! A true, real and living faith leads to *life*. Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

I

So faith. What is it? It may be a dead old word, nothing to start your heart beating faster or set your mind abuzz or place a smile on your face.

Is faith merely believing a certain set of beliefs? It's deeper than beliefs. John's gospel made faith more than a noun, something to look at. John's gospel makes a verb of faith, "believing".

Faith involves trust, the trusting of the heart. It brings spiritual confidence, not the braggy kind, but the kind that gives you a solid place to stand.

Sometimes we can have faith when we haven't figured the God-thing out. A faith in life itself. A noted black mystery writer of a previous generation, Chester Himes, wrote:

There is an indomitable quality within the human spirit that cannot be destroyed; a face deep in the human personality that is impregnable to all assaults.

I've known people like that. Maybe Jesus has shown us that face, the one deep within. He brings forth that indomitable quality that cannot be destroyed. Sometimes faith takes hold of *us*, life not letting us go.

Faith is something you do, something you can see in action. It involves loyalty, loyalty to God and the ways of God.

And it involves obedience, another word that can become suspect. But Paul talked about “the obedience of faith”, and Jesus said, “If you love me you will follow my commands.” And yet, if faith is only obedience, it’s just following the rules, and rules don’t always lead to life.

II

The story of the healing of the ten lepers may help us. They cried out to Jesus for healing: “Have mercy, O Lord.” And Jesus issued a command: “Go show yourself to the priest!” What to show? They hadn’t been healed yet. But they went, and “as they went” they were healed. Faith as the first tentative steps on a path that leads to life.

One of the ten came back to Jesus to give thanks. All were healed; one came back to give thanks. Perhaps all ten were grateful, but only one came back, and Luke’s text tells us, as if to put an exclamation point on it, “he was a Samaritan!” He lived on the outside of Jewish rules and laws. But the grace of it, the sheer grace of his healing, bowled him over and he ran back to thank Jesus.

And Jesus said to him: “Your faith has made you whole!” Not just well, *whole*. That’s what we all hunger for, a wholeness that brings life.

What the story shows us is that faith is marked, authenticated in gratitude. Gratitude may be the most beautiful expression of faith. Fred Craddock, a

preacher and a teacher of preachers, including this preacher, said that when a pastor search committee is interviewing prospective minister, they must ask themselves the important question: “Does this person show any evidence of gratitude in their life?”

What an important question. And for us too. The late night T.V. host Stephen Colbert is a devoted Roman Catholic person of faith. He was asked in an interview why he was a Christian. He responded: “Because it gives me somewhere to place my gratitude.”

Perhaps our thankfulness may blossom and grow in us this season.

III

We’ve heard today Jesus’ parable of a sower, seeds, and souls. It was Mark’s introduction to all Jesus’ parables.

“Listen”, Jesus said, A farmer went out to sow and sowed some seed on a foot-hardened path. It was good news for the birds! They came and gobbled up the seed. But it was not so good for the crops.

The other seed fell on rocky ground, where the good soil was thin. The plants sprang up quickly, but because there was no depth of soil, when the sun came up, it scorched the plants and they withered and died. One needs to work the soil before the seed are thrown.

Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked the plants so they could not grow. Who likes pulling weeds? But it's necessary for growth.

Then Jesus ended the parable. There was good, deep, rich soil too, and when the good seed fell onto that soil it produced 30 fold, 60 fold, 100 fold! There's the happy ending. Then Jesus tossed the parable to the disciples and said, "You that have ears to hear, hear!" He tosses the parable to us.

Neal Grose has said that this parable makes no sense from a farmer's perspective. Just a waste of good seed. But parables do not need to be true to be *truth!*

Neal's father introduced "no till" farming to our County, and Neal has followed that path. Soil ruined by the worst kind of farming has been restored by their care. Our souls need the same.

IV

Sometimes this parable is used to make us ask "Which kind of soil am I? The hardened path, the rocky soil, the soil full of thorns? Or the good soil? But it's all good soil, and the seed is good, and the planter.

I prefer to turn the parable this way. In the garden of our lives, we all have all four kinds of soil. We need to work our land so that less and less of it is hardened path, rocky or thorny soil and more and more of it is good, deep rich

soil. Perhaps that is the spiritual work for this Lenten season: to work the soil and let our gardens grow.

For some the religion you grew up in was a toxic, unhealthy, religion that sometimes came with a toxic, unhealthy love. You have to put it away. But what can replace it?

For some of us perhaps, your faith has somehow died along the way and you cannot go back to it. Once you know something, you cannot *unknow* it, and that earlier, perhaps simpler faith no longer works. But is there faith that for us takes into account of all you know today?

In Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, the soprano sings this poignant solo:

There once were days so bright

And nights when ev'ry cricket call seemed

Right

And I sang Gloria

Then I sang Gratias Deo

I knew a glorious feeling of thank you

And ...

Thank you. ...

And now, it's strange
Somehow, though nothing much has really
Changed
I miss the Gloria
I don't sing Gratias Deo
I can't say quite when it happened
But gone is the ... thank you ...

Some lose their faith all of a sudden, often in some tragic moment in life. Others lose their faith like leaves falling from a tree. But Spring can come again. There are times in our lives that we must move from a less adequate faith to a more adequate faith. Sometimes that change is so profound it is like having a new religion.

I'm not just talking about a change in certain beliefs, it's something deeper. Brother David Steindl-Rast wrote of faith:

...growth in faith does not mean the accumulation of beliefs. It means, rather, learning to make the basic gesture of faith in more and more difficult circumstances....¹

This gesture of faith he speaks of is a deepening trust in what one has called “the faithfulness at the heart of things. Growth in faith is not saying “I believed 100 things last year. This year I’m working on 150 things.”, or “I believed the Apostle’s Creed last year. This year I’m adding the Nicene Creed!”

Growth in faith is a growing trust in the faithfulness at the heart of things, even as life brings us difficulty and perplexity.

V

This season we will be considering some things that may need to be cleared away for our faith to green and grow. There is no such thing as a second-hand faith, a hand-me down faith. Your church, your parents, your preacher can lead you only so far. It is yours to grow. Sometimes spiritual struggle helps you move toward a more authentic faith.

Cognitive dissonance happens when your mind tries to hold two things together that cannot be held together. Spiritual dissonance tries the same thing. But as with a dissonant chord in music the dissonance cannot last forever. The notes causing the dissonance either collapse, or move into a new key, a new harmony.

I once tried to hold together at the same time what I had been taught about the Wrath of God and the Love of God. I had to move to a place where the Love of

God held sway. God's Wrath dropped away. Every verse of scripture does not have the same weight. Though I tried!

Same thing about hell. A belief in hell as a place of everlasting torment became impossible for me to resolve, to hold alongside a belief in a God of love.

My growing-up faith was centered in individual salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That dimension of faith is still important to me, but my definition of salvation has changed dramatically to include all peoples, all religions and to mean the wholeness and wellness of all creation and all people, not just getting into heaven.

Dr. Seuss identified seven basic needs of children that the writers of children's books should consider. One of them is *the need to grow*. That is a life-long need. Growth is the condition of every living thing. *All things want to open*. Our faith wants to open too.

Greening also means welcoming the spiritual and theological curiosity that leads us to explore new ways of thinking, living, believing.

At the end of the Broadway musical *Candide*, the main character joins the chorus in a thrilling last song, "Make Our Garden Grow":

We're neither pure, nor wise, nor good

We'll do the best we know.

We'll build our house and chop our wood

And make our garden grow...

And make our garden grow.

That's what Lent is about this year, as it leads us to Spring and Easter. To make our garden grow, the garden of our faith, and garden of the faith of our church.

Amen

-
1. David Steindl-Rast *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer* (N.Y.:Paulist Press,1984),105.