

Pastor Letter: A Living Faith (8/7/22)

As I stated in one of my talks at our recent Spiritual Revival 2022, it was not until I entered Seminary that I encountered a deep sense of spirituality. Although I grew up in the Methodist Church and attended the Presbyterian Church when I married my wife, Debbie, I was never really taught much about “spirituality.” In my developing seminary environment, I became aware of “Spiritual Formation” and “Spiritual Disciplines” through spiritual individuals, seminary classes, special events, and spiritual organizations.

One such individual was N. Graham Standish who was instrumental in forming an ecumenical spiritual organization known as The Vineyard Guild while I was attending Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. This organization’s goal was to develop Spiritual Formation Practices and Spiritual Disciplines in the participants. In turn, these spiritual practices could be taught to the participant’s respective Christian organizations.

After I graduated from seminary, a group of 7 clergy and 5 laypersons formed a cluster of the Vineyard Guild in order to develop our own spirituality. One of the first books we studied as a group was N. Graham Standish’s book, *Forming Faith in a Hurricane*. Dr. Standish developed the concept of faith with his writings:

“While we tend to think of faith in static terms, *faith is always a process*. Faith is not something we have; it is a journey we take. Many Christians believe that we can capture faith and quantify it. People who have had conversion or “born-again” experiences may confuse this doorway into faith with faith itself. Being “born-again,” while it can be a crucial beginning to our faith journey, is not an end in itself.

Faith is always growing, seeking, and expanding in much the way Jesus describes the kingdom of God when he says, ‘It is like a mustard seed’... Faith, like a mustard seed, often begins in our hearts as something tiny that—with proper attention—we can nurture into something great. Our search for God expands our faith.”¹

Our faith is a gift from God that is ever growing, expanding, or developing or it withers on the vine due to a lack of proper nurturing. We either use it or we lose it. I gleaned a great deal of spiritual depth from 2 other seminary professors, Andrew Purves and Charles Partee, who wrote a wonderful book that developed the various doctrines of the Reformed Faith. Their chapter on faith states, “Thus, faith is a defined as the gift that is an expression of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ, established at God’s initiative by the special work of the Holy Spirit who joins us to Jesus Christ, and involving our trust in God’s gift rather than confidence in our choices... Faith in God is not a matter of our nature by of God’s grace.”² Although human beings might use our faith in our Christian journey, it is the triune God who initiates that faith within us.

Christian faith is a living faith, an active journey, a process of growing or dying, and a demonstration of our response to the love of God which has been showered upon us through Jesus Christ. Faith is a great deal more than just a belief system we have in our minds and hearts. It is a reaction that we express in overwhelming gratitude for our salvation through our risen Lord. Alister E. McGrath explains this response in his book,

¹ N. Graham Standish, *Forming Faith in a Hurricane: A Spiritual Primer for Daily Living*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), p. 11.

² Andrew Purves, Charles Partee, *Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p 15.

Christian Theology, using the words, “Faith is not merely believing that something is true; it is being prepared to act upon that belief, and relying upon it.”³

This week’s New Testament passage from the epistle of Hebrews defines faith in this manner, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible,” (Hebrews 11:1-3).

I have spent the last 50 years studying the Bible and the last 20 years delving into the realm of spirituality. I must agree with Dr. Standish that faith is an incredible journey that leads us into the depths of the grace, mercy, and love of Almighty God. My spiritual journey of faith has taken me to some amazing places all around the world. Along the way, I have experienced some truly rewarding moments, some unbelievable trials, and some glorious joys. I have been blessed to encounter some remarkable individuals who have been on their own spiritual journeys all around this globe on which we live. When asked how they knew God was calling them to walk their particular path, most humbly responded with words such as, “when the Lord opened a door, I merely obediently stepped through and followed his divine voice, doing his will.”

Our NT passage records the obedient calling of our ancestor Abraham who was asked to embark on his own incredible journey of faith, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise,” (vv. 8-9).

It takes a great deal of trust and confidence in the promises of God when we receive the unexpected call for service to the Kingdom of God. Often, we are asked to blindly step out of our comfort zones all alone into the confusing unknown in order to perform an arduous task we feel we are unqualified or ill equipped to accomplish. Later we come to realize that through this grueling and painful task, God was with us all along and our spiritual faith was greatly enhanced by this obedient experience.

We are very much like Abraham who left his family home, journeyed to a land that God showed him, and lived a nomadic lifestyle without roots in a land that had been promised to him and his ancestors as an inheritance. Once we become Christians, we live in a fallen land, looking forward to a promised eternal homeland in the heavenly realm, that is also our Christian heritage.

May we also respond like Abraham who obediently answered the call of God and served the Kingdom of God through his journey of faith to a foreign land.

May we have the faith to keep our eyes fixed upon our risen Lord as we sojourn in this fallen world serving as a faithful disciple who is looking forward to our eternal inheritance in the Kingdom of God.

Pastor Larry

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1997), p. 156.

