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Saint John's Episcopal Church
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

October 3, 2010
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 17, verses 5-10.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

A woman in our parish was happy that in the very near future she was going to have two grandchildren. In the seventh month of pregnancy, her daughter-in-law fell down the stairs in her house and the babies died. Our parishioner told me that she really had a crisis of faith. I think all of us go through that in our life; that we have those times when there is a crisis of faith.

I read a story about a young man at a university who left a manuscript with his advisor for evaluation. He told the advisor that it probably wouldn't take him very long to read the manuscript as it was only the first chapter, a chapter in which he said he explained the universe. Wouldn't it be great if we really could explain the universe in one chapter. It would be great to have knowledge that fast. I know that I have enough problems in Bible studies trying to explain where Cain and Abel got their lives.

There is much in this world that no one knows or understands. We are all somewhat like Albert Einstein's wife. Someone once asked her if she could make sense of her husband's theories. She replied that she understood the words but not always the sentences. That is the position that each of us are in too. No matter how brilliant, or well educated, or how insightful we may be, when it comes to making sense out life, we can usually understand the words, but we don't always understand the sentences.

There is much in this world that we do not understand, and the situation is getting worse. Today human knowledge is expanding so rapidly that no one can catch up with it. By the time the child born today graduates from college, says one expert, the amount of knowledge will be four times as great. By the time the same child is fifty, it will be thirty-two times as great,

and ninety-seven percent of everything known in the world will have been learned since that child was born. The memorizing of reams of facts will not be necessary, says this expert. These facts will be quickly available on our computers, but in the future we will need more knowledge, if only to know what it is we want to know.

Now let us give thanks to God that we are not saved by our knowledge. In Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 27, St. Paul writes, “God chose what in the world is foolish to put the wise to shame.” We are not saved by **what** we know, for then only the most educated and knowledgeable among us could gain entrance into God’s kingdom. We are saved, not by knowledge, but by faith. That’s good news, isn’t it? If we were saved by knowledge many of us would be in trouble. We will never have enough scientific nor technical knowledge to satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. It is not sufficient any longer to listen to the rustlings of the galaxies. It is not enough even to examine the great coil of DNA in which is coded the very alphabet of life. Beyond lies the great darkness of the ultimate dreamer who dreamed the life and the galaxies into existence.

It is not knowledge that brings us to God. It is something that goes far beyond our ability to comprehend with our gray matter the mysteries of existence. No, it is ultimately not our minds that are saved, but our souls. There’s something deep within the human soul that cries out for God and will not be satisfied until it is in perfect union with its Creator.

There’s a second thing that I want you to see. Just as we are not saved by the extent of our knowledge, we are also not saved by the level of commitment. This may be a little more difficult for us to grasp. We cannot buy our way into heaven with good works. There is no sacrifice that is great enough to guarantee us the favor of God. There have been Christians throughout the history of the church who have failed to grasp this primary spiritual principle. A good example from the Middle Ages is the Franciscan friar named St. Peter of Alcantara. He was a friend of St. Teresa. She described him like this: “For some forty years he slept every night for no more than an hour and a half. Invariably he slept in a sitting position with his head resting against a piece of wood driven into the wall. He could not in fact have lain down even if he wished for his cell was only four and a half feet long. He wore nothing but a habit and a mantle of the coarsest fabric. His head and feet were always bare regardless of the weather. He fasted for two days out of every three until he was so weak that in St. Teresa’s

picturesque phrase, “He seemed to be made of the roots of trees.” He appeared very old when St. Teresa first met him, but it was his asceticism, not his years, that had aged him for he was only fifty-nine. He rarely spoke, according to St. Teresa, but when he did it was a pleasure to listen to him. He had lived in the cloister as a member of the barefooted reform within the Order of St. Francis from the age of sixteen. For much of this time he had been a complete solitary. He always walked with downcast eyes. He once confessed that, after living in a certain house of this order for three years, he did not know a single friar by sight.

That poor man. How could he have missed so completely the abundant life that Jesus has promised. How could he have read the teachings of Jesus and concluded that mortification of the flesh would drive him closer to God? I believe Jesus was a man who loved life, and he loved people. He did not call people to withdraw from the world, but to go out and win the world. We are not saved by knowledge, although knowledge is important. God gave us good minds for a reason. We are also not saved by our good works, although good works are certainly an important part of our lives as Christians.

So what is it then that draws us into God’s kingdom? Jesus said in today’s gospel, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

We are saved by our faith. Just a tiny bit of faith will produce miracles. That’s the Gospel. We can be saved by a mere cry like that of the wretched man of old when he said, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” That is enough -- just a simple “yes” to God. The mistake we often make is the assumption that faith must be of the spectacular variety in order to be valid. It is hard for us to grasp that just a little faith is all we need.

Jesus says that only a tiny measure of faith separates believers from unbelievers, but that tiny measure is enough. It would be nice if we could be people of complete and unquestioning faith, but that is hardly possible. Always we struggle with some doubt; that’s human nature. However, even a little faith is enough to receive God’s blessings.

The painter Whistler once wrote an essay titled “Ten p.m.” This essay contended that at ten o’clock at night, even muddy water gleams with the reflection of light. From London Bridge at ten p.m. the river Thames, which

looks quite ugly during the day, seems to lose its filth as it reflects the glow of the city's lights. The surface of the muddy city stream is beautified at night as it sparkles with the gems of light. And that is what happens when we allow that little faith within us to reach out to God. The muddy river is still there, and it will take a lifetime and more of believing and growing to be purified enough for the crystal sea of God's eternity. But when it becomes ten p.m. for our souls -- when the little bit of faith shines on us -- suddenly that which was so ugly is transformed into something beautiful.

Just a little faith will do. For you see, it is not how much we believe in God that makes the difference for us; it is that God believes in each of us. God created us in God's own image and gave God's own son in our behalf. God's son showed us the path that leads to abundant life in this world and beyond, and Jesus gives us a simple invitation. It is: "Follow me." It is not through our knowledge, nor through our commitment, that we will join the host of heaven, but simply by saying, "Yes, I will follow."

Phillips Brooks. On the north side of Trinity Church in Copley Square is one of the largest statues in the city of Boston. It is a statue of Phillips Brooks. Phillips Brooks was a great preacher in the nineteenth century. He was the rector of Trinity Church in Copley Square, he was the Bishop of Massachusetts. We know him as the author of the famous hymn *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Phillips Brooks, a great preacher from a century ago, once told a story about his father. He said his father was also a pastor and lived on a salary of eight hundred dollars a year with a family of eleven growing children. It amazed Phillips Brooks that his family lived on so little.

I remember this story because I read about it when I was a intern at Trinity Church, and it just amazed me so I want to share it with you. He remembered his father saying once at the table -- something that made a deep impression on Phillips Brooks' young mind. Having poured his tea into a saucer to cool, his father was resting his two elbows on the table, and Phillips Brooks' mother sat opposite him murmuring in a sweet, refined, gentle, sad way that the bills were due, that she had no money, that indeed she did not see how they could get along, that for her part she expected to die in the poorhouse. At this statement of despair, Phillips Brooks' father dropped his hands to the table and his eyes sparkled. He said, "My dear, I have trusted God for forty years, and God has never forsaken me. I am not going to distrust God now." That woke young Phillips Brooks up. It sank

into him. During his early life, he went through perils of sickness, and poverty and all forms of limitation and trouble, but he never forgot that scene and that sentence. “I have trusted God for forty years; God has never forsaken me. I’m not going to distrust God now.”

Phillips Brooks’ father knew what it was to follow Jesus. He was saved, not by his knowledge, not by his good works, but by his faith in Jesus.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs

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