

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
August 14, 2016
Marley United Methodist Church, Glen Burnie MD

Isaiah 5: 1-7
Psalm 80: 1-2, 8-19
Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2*
Luke 12: 49-56*

Living Faith

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen

In late June this year Fox news reported a story about a retired USAF MSg with 33 years of service. It seems this fellow had a friend and fellow airman who was retiring and he had been invited to participate in the retirement ceremony by conducting a 'flag folding ceremony'. During the flag folding he was interrupted by the senior officer present and escorted from the room and off the base. What was his offense? The script for the ceremony he and his friend had chosen contained these words among others, "Let us pray that God will reflect with admiration the willingness of one nation in her attempts to rid the world of tyranny, oppression and misery. . .It is this one nation under God that we call, with honor, the United States of America. God bless our flag. God bless our troops. God bless America." I don't know what would have come next because this is where he was cut off.

From time to time you hear news of Christians being persecuted for being Christians. They are arrested and detained because they are practicing their Christian faith. Now when I say that, I suspect most of you assume that I am talking about some place overseas, right? It is true that in a number of countries, the practice of Christian faith is considered to be a dangerous behavior that threatens to destabilize the society.

Traditionally it has not been viewed that way in the United States. In the United States church attendance is still reasonably common and we still tend to expect it of those who leaders of our communities and government.

However, there is a disturbing trend that I've begun to notice:

1. There is the Master Sergeant I mentioned earlier.
2. Then there was the case of Kim Davis, the county clerk from KY.
3. I recently read a news article about a newspaper in Knoxville TN which refused to run an advertisement for a local business because there was an objectionable word in the store's name. It appears that the ad placed by the Cedar Springs Christian Store contained the word 'Christian' and therefore could not be published in that newspaper.
4. And just this past week an assistant high school football coach in Washington state was fired for praying. It seems that after the game was over he would go to mid-field, take a knee and pray – usually for about 30 seconds, the report says. Sometimes some of the players joined him and at other times he was alone. It does not appear that he ever invited or expressed any desire for anyone else to join him – it was just something he did. But he lost his job for it.

While on the one hand there appears to be a clear growing hunger in our society for genuine spiritual transformation, people aren't looking to the church for it. People quite reasonably assume that Christianity is far too associated with the way we've always done things to be offering anything with any power to change lives. It doesn't appear to have changed ours – like our politicians, we blend right in.

I have also sometimes felt that the only thing you needed to do to be considered Christian in our society is to not be something else. Not Jewish, not Muslim, not Buddhist, not atheist?--then you must be Christian – but you had better not act like it in public.

Now it is an unavoidable fact that the general perceptions of what Christianity is have been formed by what church-going people are seen to be and do. And if we are perceived as being people who live comfortably with the status quo values of our society, then I would suggest that we are

a long way from the kind of Christianity envisaged in the readings we heard just now from Luke's gospel and the letter to the Hebrews.

In the gospel reading, Jesus suggested that the impact of what he was all about would be like taking to the earth with a flame-thrower, and that it would be seriously divisive — it would even split families as people found themselves taking opposing sides over fundamental issues of how to live. And in the letter to the Hebrews, the exercise of faith is depicted as something over which kingdoms rise and fall and people are hounded out of towns and mercilessly persecuted.

It seems to me that one of the reasons we have rendered Christianity safe and innocuous is that there has been a major change in the way we think about what faith is. As I said last week, we often think and talk about it as being something you have: "Do you have faith?" "She's got a lot of faith." "You need to have a little faith." "Do I have enough faith?" Those sorts of statements make faith sound like a possession, like something you own.

And there are lots of things that our society has decided it can tolerate people possessing as long as they don't cause a fuss. Perhaps we've begun to think of faith as being a bit like marijuana — the possession of small amount of faith for private use will no longer get you into trouble; but don't start doing it in public lest you become a news story.

Somehow I don't think either Jesus or the writer to the Hebrews was thinking of faith as something you simply possess for private consumption while keeping your head down and letting the rest of the world go about its business.

Faith is not a thing that can be possessed. It is something you do, or something you exercise. It is something active that affects those around you. Perhaps we could compare it to power: there is no such thing as simply possessing power without ever exercising it and without anyone else being affected by it. And as serious management types are aware the way to get power is to give it away. Power only exists when you exercise it; in empowering others; so, too, with faith. Faith only exists as it is

exercised and as it shapes what you do and as you use your faith to lead other to faith.

That's why I think it is a mistake to completely equate faith with belief. You can have a belief that has no consequences. I can believe that Noah's ark was 450 feet long and painted with green and yellow stripes, but it won't make any difference in how I live when I wake up tomorrow morning. I can believe in unicorns, mermaids and flying saucers, but that isn't going to affect how I treat other people. Faith is different from – and more than – belief.

Faith is more like trust; it is belief that steps out and commits itself to action. If we say that we trust that God's foolishness will prove wiser than the wisdom of the world, we are exercising an active choice and backing one side over the other. We are committing ourselves to living by one and rejecting the other. And once we start to do that, the sparks begin to fly and the fires begin to break out, and, heaven forbid, we might make the news as well.

For example: if we say we are willing to trust God's radical hospitality over the world's self-protective closed border policies, we may be taking real risks. I am just as concerned as the next fellow that citizens live in safety, protected from terror attacks – I just happen to believe that applies to citizens of every country, not just this one.

And if that means we reject the wisdom of the world that says that this country should keep out those seeking asylum from elsewhere, and instead choose to trust we will be vindicated by God for offering a place of welcome and refuge, then we will not only find ourselves on the unpopular side of the opinion polls, but we may find ourselves publicly vilified. As I said the other week, someone needs to stand between the victim and the mob – and God says that's our job.

And that's what faith is. It is not an exercise in faith to say that we believe that something should be done but that we're not willing to do it unless it is popular or at least legal. That is not the exercise of faith, it is the exercise of compliance. Jesus was in no doubt that his own radical faith in God

was going to plunge him into a baptism of fire. And he was also quite clear about the stress and anxiety that he was going to have to endure as he approached it. And he was under no illusions that the whole-hearted living of the life of faith would make the world a nicer and more peaceful place. "My presence will not bring peace," he said, "but will cause people to take sides, one against the other. It will split families and divide friends."

Now all that might sound decidedly uninviting. "Where is the good news?" you might reasonably ask. Well, both readings point to the answer. Jesus speaks of a baptism of fire, but a baptism is not only something you are plunged into. It is also something from which you emerge with a new identity and a new life filled with God's Holy Spirit.

The baptism of fire is the birth place of new life. Similarly, the opening image of faith in the reading from Hebrews was of God's people exercising their faith by passing through the Red Sea to freedom. The dilemma of being trapped between an army and an impassable body of water is a situation in which the only easy way out was a compliant return to slavery, and the way to freedom and life would only open to those who made a massive investment of risk-defying faith.

So the good news is that we are not called to face the fire for no reason, or to take risks of faith just for the hell of it. Rather we are called to face the fire simply because that's what lies between us and the realization of God's purposes on earth and there is no way around it. And just what that fire is going to be like has, up to now, in my mind at least, been uncertain. There is a section of the Revelation which says that evil will work its way into people's acceptance by appearing to be benign or even desirable. But when its power is sufficiently established, the velvet glove will come off and the iron fist will be revealed. And the trending news points to us approaching a new age of legal persecution. Do Marnie and I have to start worrying about saying table grace when we're in a restaurant, or shall we do it furtively so as not to draw attention or give offense? As Jesus said, we need to know how to interpret the present time. (Lk 12.26)

But as the writer to the Hebrews says, if we keep our eyes on Jesus and follow his lead, the vision of the freedom, love and joy to come will give us

the perseverance to push on through whatever threatens to engulf us, because the vision of a world where love and justice finally reign and all things are made one in God is the promise of the only life that is ultimately worth living and the only life worth dying for. So live your faith and make it a living faith.

Amen