

Gospel Power
October 07, 2007
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

A shade over 200 years ago, one of the early patriots of our nation, was Thomas Paine and he wrote the ***These are the times that try men's souls*** and so they are today for many, many women and men on a national level to be sure, but for many, on a personal level as well. Our ***faith*** can be tried as well.

As we heard in the Gospel reading, the disciples had their trying time, too, and they were not ***leak-proof*** when it came to faith. Like the rest of us, the disciples did not receive ***Gospel power*** from Jesus as a once-and-for-all, self-replenishing gusher of grace. In writing to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 4:7), Paul likened them to ***earthen vessels*** or ***clay jars*** into which the Gospel had been poured. Certainly, on many occasions, they exhibited the power of faith, but, just as often, this faith merely seeped away like water from a crack in a clay pot. Even Jesus, the Gospels unanimously report, was continually in need of prayer

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and solitude with the Father to rekindle the divine fire that would go toward enflaming the lives of others.

The Christians of the New Testament, to their credit, realized that this fire of faith had to be *rekindled*, as Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:6), or *increased* as the disciples said to Jesus (Lk. 17:5). It just didn't happen on its own. The *fire of faith* could not be a take-it-for-granted kind of thing as Jesus reminds the children of Abraham, (or children of life-long Episcopalians) who wanted to rely on a religious pedigree as a substitute for an intimate, vibrant relationship with God. The fire of faith is a gift to be sought after, nurtured, and then given away.

How then are we to be a people of rekindled faith? How is our faith to be increased to undergo a movement in size from *nothing* to *next-to-nothing* as demonstrated by the *mustard seed* analogy Jesus used.

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Holy writ says, simply, we are to *ask* for it. It is a treasure to be given to those who want it and will go to any lengths to get it. Unlike belief, which is something to be held in the *mind*, faith is a fire in the *heart*. Faith isn't forced, it is *received*. It is given by the Spirit, who arouses in us the desire for God and then leads us to Jesus Christ who will perfect our faith. How deep does this rekindled faith go? The greatest evidence lies in the history of the Church, where people over and over have chosen to renounce their *lives* before they would renounce their *faith*.

Then there is the *community*. The picture of the early Christian community reveals anything but indifference to being in Christ and to being faithful in corporate worship. Luke, writing in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42) says, *they devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*. This was the four-fold method of re-

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kindling faith in the primitive Church, and it should be no different today.

Translated for our time, these four things from Acts *and* from the Baptismal Covenant in the Book of Common Prayer, would include:

- a) Immersion in *Scripture* as a faith strengthening reality, perhaps no more than a verse or a chapter a day, but involving reflection and commitment to a wisdom beyond contemporary thinking.
- b) The *fellowship* would mean a conscious decision to be an ongoing *integral* part of a faith community, like the Parish of Grace Church.
- c) The *breaking of the bread* is a dedication to nurturing faith through the sacraments by which the Church gives concrete form to its own essence.
- d) and *prayer*....prayer is always prayer. It was no accident that the coming promise of the Father at

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Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, occurred while the disciples were *constantly devoting themselves to prayer* (Acts 1:14).

Faith grows and flourishes in collectivism. Individualism in the early Church was unknown, except in the realm of personal prayer. Without regard for education, wealth, status, political leanings, ancestry or authority, the Christian community invited members of the Body, *followers of the Way*, as they put it, invited them to a solidarity, a mutual commitment to the Gospel, a common reverence for one another as sisters and brothers in Christ.

The heart of the faith is *giving love*, giving it not only to the marginal and the forgotten, but also *to the people closest to us*. For too long Christian witness has suffered from the example of a people proclaiming God's love for the world, while neglecting to love the

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people around them, wherever and whoever they may be. Faith must be expressed in love.

Earlier in these remarks, I mentioned Paul's image of the *treasure in earthen vessels*. In subsequent verses he wrote: *we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed* (2 Cor. 4:8-9); *so we do not lose heart* (4:16); *we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal* (4:18); *we walk not by sight, we walk by faith* (5:7).

AMEN.