

DISCIPLESHIP FAITH – IRISH STYLE
Sunday, June 15th, 2008 – Grace Church, Haddonfield
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Top of the morning to you! We have readings today that talk to us about the nature of faith. It's a word that's spoken in many religious circles, but what does it mean to us? There is a progression that occurs upon closer inspection. God makes a promise, the person trusts God (has faith), and God answers with a gift. For us, faith is the call to live a holy life, modeled after Jesus Christ. It's not about living a set of rules, but living life with compassion, steadfast love and mercy. For us, this is the nature of faith.

During our recent trip to Ireland, we saw first hand the faith of these people. The people were intimately connected to the land, to God and to their faith history. As visitors, we encountered it at every turn. When we walked into the monastic sites that date back from the 5th century, or the Churches from the 11th & 12th century, or the more modern Churches of the 18th & 19th century, we were awed by the spirit of the places. Faith has shaped and molded these people since the 2nd century. Faith here, we found, is a part of life. God promises to be with people always, despite all the suffering and agony of oppression and occupation over the years.

In Genesis today, we hear about the Abraham's call. God says to him, "I'm sending you to a new place. You have to leave that you know, but I promise you greatness, the land (like Ireland!) and descendants." Out of faith, Abraham goes. The gift he encounters is not only the land, and eventually a son, and presence of God. The Irish understand this as is evident in their ability to remain faithful over the centuries. Can we do the same?

In Romans today, Paul speaks about faith being the way for us, not the law. He goes on to say that only God can save us, and this is the gift of grace. This was brought home for us on the Ireland trip as we watched the movie, "The Field." Again, it talked about the land, and we were driving through the mountains and lakes of Connemara where the movie was shot. The movie was about a man who thought he had the rights to the land. By his reckoning, the law should favor him. His obsession led to disaster and suffering. He had the misguided belief that he was owed, entitled to the land. Too often we wrongly believe something is ours because we earned it. Faith is not about what we do, but what god does for us. Do we really understand this?

Matthew's Gospel presents us with a new world shaped by faith in Jesus. There are three examples. First, we have the call of Matthew. Here's a hated tax collector, loved by Jesus, who says, "Follow me" and Matthew does just that! We hear Jesus sits with sinners and demonstrates compassion for those who are outcast. Faith is given to those least members of society and the promise of a relationship with God is held out to them!

Next, there is the woman who has a hemorrhaging problem. This may sound more like a medical problem to us, but in Jesus' time, blood was sacred. Those who came in contact with blood were considered unclean. They became outcasts until the blood was finished and they followed rituals of cleansing. This woman had no standing in her society because of her bleeding problem. Her faith in Jesus comes to the front when she says, "If I could just touch the hem of his cloak, I will be healed!" Can you image such faith? She doesn't

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need to speak to Jesus; she doesn't need to touch him. All she needs is to touch his garment! Do we have such faith?

While we were in Ireland, we visited Knock Parish. In 1879, an apparition (vision) of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, St. John the Evangelist and the Lamb (Jesus) appeared. It was the perfect example of Irish faith that rests in places and practices. It is a pilgrimage site today. We were struck by the people walking around the Church reciting the rosary seven times praying for some particular need. What astonished to discover 12 water faucets lined up on one side of the plaza. When we walked into town, we discovered the merchants selling all sizes of plastic and glass bottles. There are countless stories of people who have been healed by the water at Knock. We saw parents coming with handicapped children to fetch the water. There were adults in wheelchairs, Downs Syndrome children and adults, and other sick people coming ... searching for healing, and having such faith that it brought them to this place.

In Matthew, we see the faith of a religious leader coming to Jesus to find healing for his dead daughter. This is remarkable in the fact that the man is a leader in a synagogue. Being a religious leader does not make us safe from sickness and death. Here is a man who practiced in the sacred place, but out of faith, he turned to Jesus for help. The promise of such faith is healing, and Jesus' touch revived the girl. Do we have the ability to suspend our self-importance and reach out in faith?

There is a story of an ex-con who was finally heading home (Christian Century, June 17, 2008). He ignored the college kids on the bus and stared out the window. At a stop, a young woman got on and spoke with him. He told her that he was in prison for four years, and that his wife hadn't written to him in over three years. When he was paroled, he wrote her and said he still loved her. He would understand if she never wanted to see him again. To make it easy, he suggested his wife use a yellow handkerchief to communicate her feelings. If she wanted him back, she could tie it on the old oak tree near their home. If there were no handkerchief, he would stay on the bus and keep going.

Word of this spread through the bus. As they came into the town, the college kids flocked to the windows. When they saw the tree cheering broke out. On the tree was not one, but hundreds of yellow handkerchiefs. This story inspired Tony Orlando's hit song, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree." It takes great faith to risk being rejected. The ex-con was prepared for whatever the answer was to be. Are we prepared to be faithful disciples and follow Jesus?

The pattern is the same, God makes a promise, we respond in faith, and God gives us a gift! If we can learn to live by faith, with the compassion we see in Jesus Christ, and resisting trying to earn our way with rules or rituals ... we can experience a new world. We are invited to trust God, to trust Jesus, and act towards others, as we want to be treated. In a sense, we being invited to become Irish ... become people of faith! A grand new world awaits us on the other side of faith!

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