14th Sunday After Pentecost, September 7, 2014, Liturgical Year “A”

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA
The Very Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Dean

“Faith in Action”

FAITH

Life is a journey. There is much we can see, much we can know, much we can understand. But there is also much we can’t see or know or understand as well. We can’t see or know what is in another person’s mind, we can’t see all the events and people over history that enabled us to be here right now, or all that is currently going on 24/7 around the world. We can’t fully understand the human heart – why certain people do the things they do. And yet, the Bible says that we can see God, we can know God, and we can understand the reality of God!

I mean think about it for a moment. The beauty of the Christian faith is the reality that God can be known, seen and understood. Jesus said in John 14:7, ’If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.’ This is what separates our faith from all other religions. And yet, even with this great reality, we can only know, understand and see God partially. The Apostle Paul put it this way in 1 Cor. 13:12 “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then (when the perfect comes) face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.’

Faith is the term given to describe what we believe. Jude vs.3 tells us “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” So the Christian Faith is what we believe but faith is also the means how which we believe. It is basis for seeing, knowing and understanding God. Why? Faith is trusting in God with what we already know, understand and see to be true (what He has revealed to us, so it isn’t believing without evidence,) but it is still believing, still trusting even though you can’t know, fully understand or fully see everything clearly. And my friends, in life that happens time and time again, doesn’t it? We get glimpses of the Divine, we receive insight and wisdom, and yet we still find out time and time again how much we can’t see, know, or understand.

But if there is one thing that we can always see, know and understand it is a faith that works! True faith can be seen in how we live our lives. What we are talking about is faith in action. James writes in 2:14-17, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

So the Word of God is saying don’t be just a talker, be a walker, don’t just give lip service, but be of service, don’t just believe in here, but go and do out there.

ROMANS 12:9-21
Our second reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans gives us one of the clearest descriptions of faith in action. If we are truly followers of Christ these things should be evident in our lives. I want us to look at this passage in detail. In fact, if there was a passage to be put our refrigerator or on desktop to be read every day it would be this one.

Paul is writing to the church in Rome but unlike most of his other letters, this epistle is not dealing with particular problems the church is facing rather it is the finest and clearest articulation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In his letter Paul presents the reality and consequences of sin, the judgment of God, the need for grace and salvation, why we are saved by faith, how the Holy Spirit makes our salvation a reality, how God is not done with Israel and why there will be many who come to Christ from Israel before His return, and then he winds down His letter by talking about how this faith should be lived out.

You see the Christian faith is more than just following a series of commands – thou shall not murder, a commit adultery steal or lie. It is more about what we should be doing than it is what we should not be doing. Any person for the most part can keep the Ten Commandments outwardly, but the Christian faith goes deeper. It is about transforming people from the inside out. And the only way of transformation is to know the truth and love of Jesus Christ.

Let’s now look again at Romans 12:9-21:

“Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; 11 not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; 12 rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, 13 contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. 17 Do not be wise in your own estimation. 18 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. 19 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 20 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord. 21 BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.”

THE STARTING POINT IS LOVE

Let love be without hypocrisy. What does this mean? It all begins with love. God loves us first. And we are to love in kind. True love, godly love, unconditional love. Not the love of the world which is fleeting, flashy, and feeling oriented. One of the main criticisms Jesus had of the Jewish leadership was hypocrisy. Saying one thing and being condescending to others while you were guilty of the same offense or maybe you didn’t have a problem in that area but you were just as sinful in another. There is nothing
more detrimental to our Christian witness than hypocrisy. It will kill it because we aren’t really who we say we are. It is often an excuse people make of not going to church. Oh they’re a bunch of hypocrites. Well they may be right but you shouldn’t allow hypocrites to keep you from following God or going to church! Now in this context Paul is saying that our love should be genuine and the Bible is clear. If we truly love God whom we can’t see, than we better be loving people whom we can see. If we see our brother in need and do not help him, that is an example of love that is hypocritical.

Abhor what is evil – evil is real. It can be very obvious as is the case of those who murder, torture, abuse and defile others. It can be subtle – a backbiting tongue, a passive indifference to the needs of others, an obsession with something that is good in and of itself, or not so good but that it robs us of a deeper relationship with God or others. Paul is using one of the strongest verbs around – abhor, which can also be translated to “detest, hate.” We can make no compromise with it. It is what it is. It is destructive and self-destructive. It takes no prisoners but wants the entire person – body, soul and spirit. It must be abhorred.

How do we abhor and defeat evil? Cling to what is good. The word used here is the same Greek word, kollao, which literally means "to glue, to bond, to unite." It is the same word used in Genesis 2 in reference to a husband leaving his family to join his wife He shall cleave to her, become one with. Jesus said, “No one is good except God.” To cling to good means to become united with God.

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love, giving preference to one another.” Devotion to each person – life is about personal relationships, between people and true love will be exemplified in devotion to each other. And if we are truly devoted to one another we won’t let ego get in the way. Humility will be the order of the day.

And this devotion should be characterized by diligence, spiritual fervor, and a realization that we ultimately we do all the above because we seek to serve the Lord, (Christ) in others.

And the way we continue to do all of the above is to rejoice in hope (our future), persevering in tribulation (keep on keeping on), devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.” Think of labor, working out, running.

“Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.” If there is one thing that separates the Christian faith it is the attitude we are to take to those who harass and pressure us because of our faith. This here is a reference to our tongues. Are we in the habit or cursing those that hate us or are we seeking their good? Are we demonstrating love without hypocrisy which is tough love – a love that seeks the best for the person – not a love that enables but seeks reconciliation and restoration.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” In other words, be with people in their good times and in their bad times. Don’t just be a fair weather friend. Don’t just be about trying to make everyone feel better. To bless and encourage doesn’t mean we don’t weep and feel sad with those who have lost a loved one, been diagnoses with a terrible illness, or have suffered a setback. What Paul is talking about there is the ministry of presence. Being involved in the lives of others without necessarily saying much.
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Now Paul talks about relationships. *16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation*” Jesus said, “*The meek shall inherit the earth. The one who humbles himself will be exalted.*” Don’t be partial, run with the little guy. Don’t think too highly yourself.

**THE MOST DIFFICULT CALL - "DON'T TAKE REVENGE!"**

And now we come to the summary, the end goal when dealing with a fallen world. Paul writes, *17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 19 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord. 20 “BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Paul is echoing Jesus words from Mt. 5:43-44, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’ 44 ‘But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,’*”

We are not to take revenge, we are to seek peace and pursue it, knowing that God sees all and He will repay in His time. Paul quotes, the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures here, Dt. 32:35; Proverbs 25:21-22 to be precise. But we also can’t forget what Paul writes in the next chapter, Romans 13:1-5:

*“Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’ sake.”*

The truth is the only way ultimately overcome evil is with good. And how fitting that we hear these words in light of what is going on in many parts of our world? All physical evil is a manifestation of spiritual evil. I have not heard many of our political leaders call our nation to pray for wisdom and to make the right decisions in terms of the terrorism that is ever present. As a Church we need to remember that bullets while sometimes necessary don’t change hearts, they only stop them. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ changes hearts.

It is why as the Body of Christ we need to be about praying and financially supporting the persecuted church and missionaries. Later this month, Friday September 26, there will be Global Prayer Vigil for Pastor Saeed Abedini and Persecuted Christians around the World. This marks the 2nd year
anniversary that Pastor Saeed Abedini has been imprisoned in a brutal Iranian prison for his faith in Jesus Christ. His testimony is quite remarkable and one that is being repeatedly found across the Moslem world.

I want to close by sharing a recent article from the September edition of Billy Graham’s Decision magazine, entitled, “A Move of God in the Moslem World.”

"Saeed Abedini, who is serving an eight-year sentence in a brutal Iranian prison for his Christian faith, came to Christ at age 20. A devout Muslim at the time, he had found a Bible and started reading it. One night, he was awakened three times by a voice that said, “Saeed, I am coming soon. Go preach My Gospel.” The third time, the voice was accompanied by a bright light shining through Saeed’s bedroom window. Trembling and sweating, Saeed said, “I will do it.” At that moment, the light moved away, and he saw what appeared to be the back of Jesus exiting through the window.

Saeed’s wife, Naghmeh, recounts her own family’s arrival in the U.S. when Naghmeh and her twin brother were 9. The two siblings had wondered how to find God, and one day Naghmeh’s brother came to her, shaken and moved. “I’ve found the God we’ve been looking for,” he said. He had seen a vision of Jesus.

More and more, Christians are hearing stories of Muslims, especially in the Middle East, coming to faith in Jesus Christ partly as a result of having a vision or a dream.

“I can’t explain it,” said Franklin Graham to a group of pastors at BGEA on March 25. “I’m not even going to attempt to explain it. I just tell you, it happens. God is at work in that part of the world in a great way.”

Missions expert David Garrison, a former missionary to Libya and author of A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ, sees this phenomenon as part of a larger move of God in the Muslim world.

“We’d be very hard-pressed to nail down specific numbers,” Garrison told Decision, “but certainly hundreds of thousands have walked away from Islam and come to faith in Jesus Christ. We’re even getting reports from the war-torn areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, that many of the Taliban and Mujahedeen, who for generations have been embroiled in warfare in the name of Islam, are simply saying, ‘This cannot be God’s perfect will for people, for mankind.’”

As a result, Garrison said, when they encounter Christ through a dream or vision, followed by hearing the Gospel explained on a radio or satellite broadcast or through Scripture translation, many come to salvation.

Naeem Fazal, pastor of Mosaic Church in Charlotte, N.C., says a supernatural experience played a role in his coming to faith. He grew up in a Muslim family in Kuwait, and he had come to the U.S. to attend college. While he was mainly interested in meeting girls, his older brother, who had come to the U.S. earlier, had put his trust in Jesus Christ.

Naeem made it clear to his brother, Mahmood, that he was not about to convert to Jesus Christ, but he did agree to accompany Mahmood to meetings of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes at the college. After one meeting, Mahmood challenged Naeem to pray that God would reveal Himself to him. Three nights later, as Naeem lay in bed,
he was suddenly aware of the room becoming unnaturally dark, and an evil presence seemed to sit on his legs and
grab his shoulders. The door creaked open and a second, even more fearsome, presence entered. Naeem felt sure
these were demons who meant to kill him, and he cried out, asking Jesus to save him. The beings disappeared.

Some time later that night, he felt someone shaking his shoulders and at first feared it was the demons again. Instead,
he saw Jesus and understood Him to say, “I am Jesus. Your life is not your own.”

What should Christians make of such spectacular stories?

“Believe them,” says Aileen Coleman, a nurse who has served for nearly 60 years at the Annoor Sanatorium, a
hospital for lung diseases, in Mafraq, Jordan. “I feel very strongly that God is using supernatural experiences with
people here as a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ to them. Right from the days of the Old Testament, God spoke
through visions and dreams. So it’s not something new.”

Experts add that if God gets someone’s attention through a dream or vision, it does not in any way diminish the
responsibility of believers to communicate the Gospel.

“The tragic thing,” Garrison said, “is that unless someone is there to tell them what the dream or vision means or to
present to them a Scripture in their own language so they can read it and hear it and understand it and then find the
Jesus of the Bible, they’re left with this haunting sense of, who was this? What does this mean?”

Coleman tells the story of a man who came to the hospital in Mafraq some 20 years ago and said he had seen a
vision of someone telling him: “If you want to know the truth, go to Mafraq, find the white-haired lady and she will
tell you the way of truth.” Coleman’s co-worker, Dr. Eleanor Soltau, had white hair. She called a male evangelist on
the hospital’s staff who led the man to Christ.

“As literate, believing Christians, we don’t need dreams and visions,” Coleman said. “We have the written Word.
But so many of these people who have a dream or a vision or a supernatural experience have never read the Word.
So it’s very important that we take them to the Word of God.”

Nabeel Qureshi, a former Muslim who now works with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, said during his
college years he diligently studied both Islam and Christianity in an attempt to discern which was true, and three
dreams helped to push him toward Jesus. Still, his Christian friends played a crucial role in his conversion. Qureshi
has this advice for believers:

“Love the Lord Jesus with everything you have, and love your Muslim friend as yourself. Not as an acquaintance, not
as an evangelism project, but as yourself. Let them see your love for God and what He has done for you. Most
Muslims who are devout do not love Allah per se, but rather are devoted to the system of Islam. Show them the
difference.” ©2014 BGEA

That is a message we are to take to all people. Show them the difference Jesus makes! Put your
faith in action! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!