



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, August 11, 2019

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Genesis 15:1-6 | Psalm 33:12-22 | Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 | Luke 12:32-40

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Certain elements of faith are easier to handle than others. Can any decent human being honestly object to commands to treat others with respect and compassion? It's certainly how we want to be treated. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," is not an unreasonable personal goal to strive for. Though the world would be a nicer place if a few more people did a little more striving along those lines. But, then, that's always been the case.

Likewise, it's not such a burden to devote some time to learning the primary teachings of a belief system. Just a couple of weeks ago, we heard Jesus teaching his disciples a basic prayer formula. For two millennia, Christians have committed the five sentences of the Lord's Prayer to memory. It's so simple, a child can use it. Yet it contains all we need to nourish our own spiritual journey.

Even finding a way to believe the otherwise unbelievable is not really that hard, if you can find enough support for it. The scriptures are quite clear that it was a combination of God's Spirit working in people's hearts and the testimony of those who witnessed the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that convinced others to believe. What started as a small, isolated movement was transformed into a world religion because enough people came to believe that the stories they were told spoke of a profound truth that could transform life.

None of these are particularly challenging aspects of faith. Just about anyone can muster up what it takes to live by a certain moral code, or study a spiritual system, or adopt a religious tradition. It takes some work, but those are not the hard parts. What's difficult, and what ultimately derails many people in their search for God, are what all these preliminary efforts point us toward – Faith in a promise.

Everything we want and hope, is built on the slippery slope of promises. When promises work the way they're supposed to, it's great. When they don't, there's nothing that hurts more. Who hasn't been burnt by a broken promise, a relationship gone sour, a deal not carried out, a destructive pattern not changed? Nothing turns us into cynics faster than the words,

"Just give me one more chance, and..." If you've been hurt enough, you don't even hear the end of that sentence.

People often turn to faith looking for certainties, but all we ever really get are more promises. Abraham wanted a son; God asked him to count the stars. The people of Israel wanted a national identity; they were advised to "wait for the Lord." Jesus' disciples were anxious about the cares and concerns of this life; they were told, "Sell your possessions and give alms. It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." More and more promises.

The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In other words, faith is the ability to live on promises – some of which have been kept and others ... we're still waiting for their fulfillment. That's where Faith can become fragile. Human beings have never been very good at waiting for anything. We want it yesterday, but we'll settle for getting it now, if we have to. Impatience is the norm of life. So, it's not surprising that for some people, the wait turns into a burn, and God gets lumped in with all those other people who have not kept their promises.

But for others, the wait is not a betrayal. It's not a waste of time. It is time to grow into a deeper and more profound relationship with the living God – the God of Abraham, the God of Israel, the God and father of Jesus Christ, the God "who is not ashamed to be called our God." Faith is not a remedy for anything, it is a tough challenge that offers no fixes, but it can lead us to wholeness.

Ultimately we have to trust someone, we have to have faith in something because the one certainty is that we can't make it on our own. One thing that eases the way for us is that we have a promise from someone who has a pretty good track record at keeping promises of love toward us, even when we haven't been so good at keeping ours. If we can see how precious that love is, then our faith won't be so fragile. Faith will become more than just a promise, it will be the only way by which we can truly live.