

IS FAITH EXHAUSTING?

OCTOBER 26, 2008

What an exciting day in the life of our pastoral charge! This is the day we hear from our Joint Search Committee on their work to find the right leadership for Prince Edward Pastoral Charge for 2009 and beyond. These moments in the life of a parish are exhilarating though dampened with a little anxiety for the unknown ahead.

This is the time for us to remind ourselves of the faith and commitment of all those who have gone before us in Wesley and Friendship churches and the churches which closed to amalgamate together for the greater needs of a stronger parish. Both of our congregations benefited from the faith of the United Empire Loyalists and the Methodist circuit riders who provided worship leadership throughout the County.

People often say to me that it must be difficult to lead two services of worship each Sunday and dash between the two of them. However, I have not found that to be the case as the two churches are not separated by many miles nor are they that different from one another in how they operate. Christ is central to both and the members and adherents of both congregations are deeply committed to the life and work of the church of Christ.

Our two churches came together so that they could have the leadership they want and need. In my time here, I have seen this parish as more than two isolated churches come together by necessity. I have seen a growing love for one another and a deep commitment to working together for the good of the church in this area of the County. We are one in Christ, even as we worship in two different locations. Thanks be to God for this common bond.

We know that both churches require a high level of commitment and a great deal of work by every member and adherent to keep the doors open and to provide the ministry of outreach to the community. The devotion I have witnessed in both churches parallels that spoken of by St. Paul to his early church congregations. Work together for the good of the gospel. Love one another and welcome in the stranger and those in need. Never forget, that our Lord said: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them."

Our question today as we await information on our new minister, is not only what kind of a minister he or she may be, but what kind of a congregation are we in which to minister and utilize one's gift for ministry of word and sacrament? The coming together of a minister and a congregation is a great act of faith, one that requires prayerful care as it develops and grows. While the minister is critical to the life and work of the parish, equally important is the life and work of each of its members and adherents. Determination to make it work on both parts is by far the best basis to begin this journey of adventure in faith together. There needs to be a mutual determination to pray for one another that the Spirit of God may always be in the midst of all we do.

Some people are quick to complain and do not acknowledge their role in working to ensure a viable loving community of faith. Once we find the ideal minister they believe,

all will be ok. However, it is not quite that simple. Determination to support and love one another is critical for we know only too well that anything of value requires work and commitment. The best minister in the world can not do it alone. Together, anything is possible if it is also Christ centred.

This morning we read from Deuteronomy of the last days of Moses life and his death in the wilderness just as the people were about to finally cross over into the long Promised Land. Moses was the great leader who had been successful in his assignment from God to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. We have been studying this event over this fall in our Old Testament readings each Sunday.

Moses had a rocky relationship with his people. The Hebrews were so easily discontent and so very quick to complain. They lost sight of the larger purpose of the journey from Egypt through the desert into the new land. They knew God had blessed Moses and they had as people promised God to follow the leadership of Moses and to cooperate with him and heed his words. They were well aware that they had all agreed to these terms. However, Moses never seemed to please many of the people very much of the time. Something was always wrong from the people's point of view: they questioned his timing in getting things done; they tired of his constant reminders of what God expected from them; he kept them too long in the wilderness and blamed him for this even though they did understand the timetable was God's and not Moses'; they exhibited a level of orneriness which was difficult to deal with on a daily basis.

Moses in our passage this morning is now very old and tired. The people are about to move into the new land but Moses would not live to see this land he had worked so hard to enter for the better part of his life. He was very disappointed with this conclusion to his life but accepted it as God's will. He appointed Joshua, a young soldier and leader with great promise for leadership as the man to lead them into the next phase of their historic journey. Moses was exhausted in his endeavours and in his faith for he had tried so valiantly for years to get this group of people to the point of joy, gratitude and thanksgiving to the generous, loving God he had known so well. Moses had kept the faith and he would be revered through the centuries for his faithful service to God and his people. And yet, his personal goal of entering the Promised Land was not to be achieved. One can imagine the disappointment; but even then Moses praised God to the end.

No doubt Moses in his discussions with Joshua warned him of the fickleness of the people. Be strong in your faith, be clear what God intends for his people and soldier on in spite of criticism, petty politics and grumbling complaints. Moses was only too well aware that a faith leader could not do it alone without the cooperation of the people. It was not God who placed stumbling blocks in his way. Rather, these were placed in his way by the pettiness and shallow faith of far too many of the people of God.

Our Matthew reading has us back to a time when religious authorities are again testing Jesus, hoping to trip him up and turn him in to the Roman authorities for punishment. They ask him this question: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"

Jesus answered in a way they did not expect. First he said this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” Then Jesus surprised them by going on further: “And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

The faith authorities had no problem with the first commandment Jesus had pointed to but certainly did not agree with the second about loving your neighbour as yourself. You can hear them muttering about the problems inherent in this second commandment from Jesus. What if our neighbour is not of our faith? What if he is from a foreign land or a different race or different language group? What if he is a slave or a lowly shepherd? Surely, you can not mean us to be open and accepting of these kinds of people?

The leaders were happy with their restrictive faith practices. It was comfortable and did not force them to get to know others as equals in their community or synagogue. They did not mind all the laws they had to follow in diet, cleanliness and Sabbath observance. But this statement of Jesus was too much to swallow.

What do you mean all our hard work of following and keeping the laws will not get us to God? Why should we believe you? Surely God does not expect us to mingle and rub shoulders with all peoples and still be able to keep ourselves pure in the faith as we present ourselves to God?

These faithful followers of the law were exhausted by all they did to remain as pure as they could. They would have admitted that it was hard work to keep the faith as they knew it and follow all the rules and regulations to remain as faultless as possible before God.

Christians know that God calls us to be in the world and to be of the world, not separated from it. It is as we are in the world living out our faith in our day to day activities of life that we meet God in those who are around us.

There is a prayer I once read by a Sadie Patterson which goes as follows: “Lord, help me to remember that nothing is going to happen today that you and I can not handle together.” This prayer states it clearly that by ourselves we can do little as we become exhausted, fretful and worried. With God, we are able to face whatever we need to face and know that God will enable us to persevere and go on to victory.

So here we are today. Are you exhausted in the faith or are you exhausted in the activities around this place to keep it viable and alive? Jesus would remind us again to drop our burdens, let ourselves go and catch the Spirit of God which energizes us and reminds us again of the wonder of God’s love, that love shown in all its splendor in the life, death and resurrection of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ.

So this morning we worship together as a parish determined to follow God's will. We gather as a people willing to move out from this place and share our faith with those we contact in our daily lives. It is with love and joy we celebrate this worship together.

So as we move into our joint congregational meeting following worship, let us expect God to be there and in our midst. Let us listen with an open mind and heart to the report of our Joint Selection Committee made up of those we entrusted to represent us and our pastoral charge as they sought to ascertain God's will in the issue of leadership of our parish.

God has been with these churches for decades and will continue to bless us in the decades ahead. He has never left us as we strive to serve him in the community and will never abandon us in the future.

Faith need not be exhausting. In trust we go forward liberated from the burdens and hurts of the past eagerly anticipating the next chapter of our faith community knowing God walks beside us now and always. Amen

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