

## "Increase Our Faith" ~ Luke 17:5

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

"For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

"And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

We are saved by faith. We walk by faith. We please God by faith. The Apostles prayed, "Lord, increase our faith."

You and I have lived and continue to live through one of the most challenging periods of our lives. We are working our way through a pandemic. It is something we have never done before. Getting through this fog of the unknown has required & continues to require faith. We have exercised our faith by being faithful in our country church ministries. Little is the same –but, our mission and message remain the same. Faith has required that we choose paths that are different; yet, sustainable (as dependable, safe and simple as possible), repeatable, reliable --for without a reasonably sure method, we, ourselves, cannot hope to remain faithful in delivering the ministry to which we have been called. Faithfulness is just the outcome of faith. It is a mucky path we walk; so, we choose each step with caution. Testing our weight as we go. We still even use the United States Mail for some 40 people. Sure, we're scared! We're not a T.V. show –we're just determined country churches.

"My heart has always assured and reassured me that the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be Divine Reality. The sermon on the Mount cannot be a mere human production. This belief enters into the very depth of my conscience; the whole history of man proves it." ~ U.S. lawyer and statesman, Daniel Webster, on the eve of his death and carved into his tombstone.

Whenever the church strategizes, there is a tendency to leave off with the reconciling words of Christ --especially the Sermon on the Mount. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." The words of Christ must not be compromised; we must have the courage to stick by them. It is the song itself that has the power, it is the message of the hymn & the sermon –not the charm of the presenter. A miss-spelled word will not ruin the church.

"There never was found in any age of the world, either philosopher, or sect, or law, or discipline which did so highly exalt the public good as the Christian faith." ~ Francis Bacon

William Arthur Ward wrote, "Faith is knowing there is an ocean because you have seen a brook!" It is no wonder that Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen."

There are parts of the church and its work that are very ordinary and very human; however, faith requires a daring of the soul to venture farther than it has seen, so far as trusting the Words of Christ enough to do them. Faith requires us to put his Words *into play*. Faith is the *heart of the mind*, the *vision of the soul*, the *hope of the future*, the *power of the church*. Faith is using what you know to discover what you don't know. "Faith is believing there is an ocean because you have seen a brook." Without faith, everything about the church and the Christian becomes

ordinary. The church is something far beyond a business. Certainly, the church must operate itself in a responsible, business-like manner; but, that is where the comparison must end. It must resist certain tactics.

***For example, how does God supply the needs of his church?*** I believe it is by faith. We must allow for a true demonstration of faith. What, exactly, do I mean by that? Fifty-six years ago, Gloria and I started out by faith to do the Lord's work. For us, that meant our personal income would be left entirely in God's hands. If God called us, certainly he could take care of us. Rather than resorting to letters with blank spaces at the bottom indicating to "check one" -- \$25, \$50, \$100 and so forth, we would resort to prayer. Not prayer meetings where others would hear; but, prayer where only God would hear. In that manner, we could be assured that God had a hand in what we were doing. We were required to send out a monthly report; however, money was never a part of our letter.

I remember one time in particular, I thought we needed one-hundred dollars. Before we prayed Gloria said, "I don't think you have things figured right; I think we need two-hundred dollars. As we said "Amen" there came a knock on the door; it was a man from Portland Oregon with a check for two-hundred dollars. He had a very urgent feeling that he ought to deliver that check to us that very morning. From that experience, I learned the meaning of the words "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear" (Isaiah 65:24 NRSV). The man left, and Gloria said, "O ye of little faith."

When we went to build the new church in Washington State, we needed land. One of our deacons, who was very well off, just happened to have an ideal piece of land. One evening, I mentioned to Gloria that we ought to go stand on that piece of land and pray that the Lord would give it to the church. A week later, Dorothy and Gordon came to our door to say, "Pastor, we believe the Lord wants us to give our land to the church. Could you come up and see what you think about it?"

After the church was built, we lost our rented home. Russell Ozment, one of my deacons, visited, urging us to buy a home. He was a trustee for a loan company and was certain that we could borrow the money --all we needed was a thousand dollars down. We went house hunting with nothing but a little faith. Secretly, we started praying for a thousand dollars. Russell was the only person who knew we were looking for a house; no one knew that we didn't have a thousand dollars, and we didn't tell them --not even in our news letter. Within a month, we had a thousand dollars. How? We received a five-hundred dollar check from a contractor I once worked for in Owego, NY; with it was a simple note: "While cleaning off my desk, I came across your address and felt the Lord wanted me to send you this check." I had not seen Ralph and Helen for at least five years. We received another check from Susie Thompson of Princeton, NJ; I had not seen Susie for at least 10 years. The check was for two-hundred dollars. That is the way things went.

When we came to the closing, we had one thousand two-hundred dollars with us. I went to fork over the money and the loan officer stopped me saying, "Since you're going to be doing the work, we're not going to require a down-payment." As it turned out, we needed that money for appliances and furniture. We had been renting a furnished house. The Lord thinks of everything. I think He knows about the pandemic.

Thirty years ago, we felt strongly that we ought to visit the folk back in Cathlamet. We didn't know where we would get the money, but we were going anyway. In the two weeks before we left, God gave us the money.

In our 56 years of ministry, we have never asked for a raise or let our needs be known. God has always made a way. In our churches, it has always been a policy of faith that we do not take pledges, and we do not approach

individuals. God has always cared for the needs of our churches. It is our way of making sure that God has a say in the business of the church. Nowadays, forced by a pandemic, we don't take offering --we just put out a plate. It has worked very well --just to say, "There really is a God who takes care of you."

Let me tell you a story. One day in our Cathlamet Church, I received a call from a very upset widow. She had three children and lived in a small rented house. Her problem was this: She had just received a letter from one of our TV evangelists saying that he had an urgent need for money and God had led him to write to her asking that she send him her rent money and then pray that God would replace it. My advice to her was straight-forward, "Pay your rent, and send him a letter telling him to pray for his own money. In that manner, he can find out if God is really interested in paying for his multimillion dollar Christian playground." It is easy to get God in debt and call it faith; then, cry that the integrity of God will be at stake if Christians don't cover the short-fall.

Here is another example of what I think of as doing an end-run around God. In Washington State, I got a call from the slick new state coordinator for our denomination, who was more business than Christian. He said, "I want you to get me a list of all the older people in your church so that I can visit them about their estate planning." I told him that I couldn't and wouldn't do that. I thought it was a gross conflict of interest for him to be doing estate management. I thought it was unethical; estate planners should never have a personal nor a secondary interest in the process. I told him that if our older people wanted to will anything to God's work, it ought to be entirely their own choice, with no special pressures from him or anyone else --otherwise, their children would come to resent it --and resent the Lord and the church along with it.

If there is really a God, we don't need to engage in begging or scheming. If there is really a God, we must allow faith space to operate. It is as simple as this: When we have done what we can, God will do what we can't.

Faith is not using God as some kind of power in my hand. Faith is *allowing God to make the choice*, then trusting his judgment. So, if I take a financial need to God, I may get it or not. But, whatever the case, I must allow God the opportunity to say no, then have faith that his judgment is right in the matter. Maybe it's a bad project. Maybe I would be putting too much of my limited life productivity into it, and he's just saving me the waste. Before I go running to the banker I must, by faith, give God the chance to say, "bad investment." Faith is letting God participate in the plan.

If we are not careful about all of this, people who are considering following Christ will simply say, "I used to attend church, but it seemed like it was all about money."

***We ought to guard the rightness, as well as the strength of our faith.*** Faith occupies a considerable place in salvation. We are not saved by love; we are saved by faith. We are not saved by courage; we are not saved by patience; we are not saved by knowledge; we are not saved by work --we are saved by faith. That is to say, "God gives his salvation to faith and no other virtue." It is nowhere written that "the courageous shall be saved." It is nowhere recorded that "a patient sinner shall be saved."

It is everywhere written "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." If a man had every other virtue in the world, he would still not please God, for "without faith it is impossible to please him" (Hebrews 11:6). Faith is the vital part of salvation. Faith is the string upon which all the pearls of Christian virtue are strung.

***There are three things in the New Testament which are called precious.*** *First*, there is the blood of Christ --we are redeemed by it. *Second*, the promises of the Bible --"the exceeding great and precious promises." *Third*,

there is faith --“to them that have obtained like precious faith.” Faith is one of God’s precious things. We ought to pay it more attention. Faith has quenched the violence of flames, it has shut the mouths of lions, it has killed giants, it has knocked down the walls of Jericho.

We must have faith in God --not our business ability, not our oratory, not our cleverness. Mary Queen of Scots once said she was “more afraid of John Knox’s prayers and faith than she was of an army of ten-thousand men.” In *Pilgrim’s Progress* “Little Faith” got to heaven all right, but what a time he had getting there. “Little Faith” couldn’t fight Apollyon --no! He wanted Christian to do that! “Little Faith” could not slay “Giant Despair” --it required “Greatheart’s” arm to knock the monster down!

No wonder the Apostles prayed, “Lord, increase our faith.” Without faith we cannot serve God. Without faith, we have no comfort in our troubles. Pay attention to your faith --take care of it and it will take care of you. The person who believes in nothing but self, lives in a very small world. The person who will go no farther than what he or she can see, won’t get very far.

***Let’s consider the hearts’ desire of the Apostles, “Lord increase our faith.”*** They did not say, “Lord, keep our faith alive.” Nor, did they say, “Lord, sustain it at the present level.” They prayed, “Lord *increase* our faith.” They knew that it is only by increase that Christians keep alive at all. Constantly going onward and forward keeps the Christian vital. “Lord, increase my faith, in its extent, intent, and intensity. Sure! You helped medical works buy masks with \$5,150 --then, you helped people get through a difficult pandemic with \$16,000 --then, you helped refugees from Ukraine with \$12,410. Faith leads to works --and it never stops.

***Where did they go for more faith? “Lord, increase our faith.”*** “For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves, *it is a gift of God.*” You get it from God. God gives it to us as we listen to him. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” They went to the right place. It is God’s work to build our faith; he is the author of it --“Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith.” You can’t go to the preacher for more faith; you need to go straight to the source. The life of a Christian is faith. Faith is to the spirit, what blood is to the body. No one is going to try to use the words of Christ without faith.

I do think faith is contagious though. I remember being on the porch of our old farmhouse one summer day about 58 years ago. My brother-in-law, Bob Reed had ventured out by faith to serve the Lord --he was telling me about the journey. I think it was on that day that I caught a vision of faith. Upon looking back, Bob didn’t get rich in life; but, he certainly made a difference. Faith has been a good road to have taken. Above all, it was the right road.

Faith is not merely praying upon our knees at night;  
Faith is not merely straying through darkness into light;  
Faith is not merely waiting for glory that may be.  
Faith is the brave endeavor, the splendid enterprise,  
The strength to serve, whatever conditions may arise.

A person’s faith is not determined by what he says about it; but, by what he does about it. Faith is believing that when we do what we can, (even in a pandemic) God will do what we can’t. Faith is living as though God really does exist. It is my responsibility to encourage you to try it! “Lord increase our faith!” Every pandemic comes to an end. Yes, from our Christian Faith comes the expression, “This too, shall pass.”

“Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). That’s where we go to get it.