

GLC Sermon – September 28, 2008
Sermon Series: Elements of a Living Faith (part 4)
Philippians 2:1-13
Luke 12:22-31, 34

Grace to you and peace...

You are well aware by now of our focus on the “Elements of a Living Faith.” They are on display all around you in the form of these banners. They appear in various places around the church, pop-up in bookmarks and wallet cards, magnets and mailings. Do you get the idea yet, that there is something important about these various elements of what a life of faith includes? Today our sermon series introducing these elements draws to a close, but in no way are we finished with our reflections on ways to nurture and encourage a faith that is living and vibrant.

We began by focusing on prayer, worship, and study of scripture – the fundamental language of faith that builds the foundation of a relationship with God on a personal level. Last week we turned to ways in which we live our faith in the world, as our confirmands affirmed their baptism and we raised up the importance of sharing God’s story with our words and through acts of service and justice. Today we consider what it means to live our faith in this congregation as we turn to the stewardship of our lives and resources, and build spiritual friendships. Personal, communal, and congregational. A rich and living faith includes all three of these dimensions.

Remarkable as it may be, the God of all Creation desires deeply to be in relationship with each one of us. Images of both caring parent and devoted lover are used throughout scripture to describe how persistently God pursues the ones God cherishes – which is every part of creation.

That relationship is deeply personal, nurtured and nourished by prayer, worship, and familiarity with God’s written word. The same relationship pushes each of us to engage more fully with the world in which we live. Just as God passionately loves the whole world, God invites us to participate in that love. And that engagement takes two basic forms: revealing God’s love with our words and with our actions.

As we learn more and more about God, and the story of God across the generations, we simply can’t help but be transformed by it – Philippians says it is “God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” The wonder of a living faith is true – a genuine relationship with the Living God will transform both you and the whole world.

It is true. And it is miraculous, because the possibilities for life and wholeness are beyond anything that we can imagine – so much so that we are tempted to believe it is too good to be true. But, a living faith is not a miracle in the sense that god will “do it to you” with out your participation. The transformation comes – in fits and starts, progress and backsliding, joy and pain, success and bitter failure – as we risk responding to God’s ever-present invitation.

Which is exactly what Jesus revealed through his life and work, his death and resurrection! Even Jesus had to respond – willingly participate – in the work God had for him in this world.

“He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself...humbled himself...and became obedient to the point of death – death on a cross.”

And he did not do it alone. Even though Jesus’ connection with Almighty God was close enough that he called God, “Daddy,” he still did not keep his faith life only personal and private. He chose friends and companions for the journey – 12 that he called by name, and countless others, including women who supported the ministry and provided for the needs of the community, and the crowds themselves, to participate in his living faith, right along side of him.

In our market-driven society, we are inclined to see faith as similar to any other product we purchase. It is possible to look for a “brand” of religion that appeals to you, and think in terms of paying what you think it’s worth as long as it meets your needs.

But a living faith is much more like falling in love and joining a family:

At first you are exploring – even evaluating the options – until you meet someone who captivates your attention. When you take the relationship seriously enough, you arrange to meet the rest of the family. Again, at first, you are simply a guest – still on the fringe and evaluating the possibilities – looking for a good fit. But before long you are helping with the dishes or taking out the garbage. And if the love continues to grow, eventually you’re invested in repairing the family home and caring for the parents as they age – and you really belong.

That’s when the church uses language of stewardship.

A living faith draws you deeper and deeper into relationship – with God, with the world God loves, and with others who share a similar relationship. These are relationships of love – relationships of the heart.

And when your heart is engaged, it becomes simply natural to spend your time, your energy and your resources on supporting that which you love. Our gospel reading reminds us, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Jesus was a real human being – and like us he needed food and clothing to survive. So the parable he told about the birds and the lilies is not intended to say, “Give no thought to your basic needs.” Rather, the point is that how you look, where you buy your groceries and what color you paint your living room, while necessary and even pleasant decisions, will not give meaning and purpose to your life.

A living faith, grounded in God’s word, nourished by prayer and worship, will give each one of us a larger view of life and reorient our priorities beyond our individual needs.

We begin to see ourselves as part of something bigger than our own families, with the ability to share responsibilities for a larger community. Shaped by the grandeur of God’s vision we catch fire with God’s passion for all that God has made, and our sense of belonging is stretched and expanded – we become more alive, and larger, and more loved than we thought possible.

Engaged in the Elements of a Living faith is no small matter – not simply a clever theme for a brief season. These elements are the means by which each of us is transformed more and more into the image of God we were created to be!

The work God begins in us at birth, affirms in our baptism, and works in us through our lifetime, is nurtured and nourished through the elements that we focus on this year. But this work is not for our sake alone. Every child of God is blessed to be a blessing – so that the abundance God provides – in love, in hope, and in creation – is made available to everyone throughout time.

You are chosen to be part of God's grand adventure – a living faith – and we have only just begun!

Amen.