

**Year C: Proper 22a Lam 1:1-6; Lam 3:19-26; 2Tim 1:1-14; Lk 17:5-10  
St. Barnabas, Florissant – October 06, 2019**

**Focus Sentence:** What is this thing we call FAITH?

**I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

If you were here at St. Barnabas for last Sunday's Eucharist, you heard me say that I was going to violate one of the chief rules for preaching; that rule (which I did indeed violate) is the one which says, "Never leave your congregation – your listeners – with a question." I did leave my listeners with a question, actually a number of questions. The main question was, "How do we interact with Lazarus?" The Gospel reading for last Sunday was the story of the homeless man, Lazarus, who ended up living at the gate of a rich man's opulent house, and who was, as far as we know, completely ignored by the rich man. Our questions last week also involved our own dealings with today's homeless, with people who beg for assistance, and with the dilemma of how (or whether) to sort out those who "deserve" help from those who have only figured out how to scam the system.

### **PAUSE**

Well, this morning, sisters and brothers, I'm going to violate another one of the rules for preaching. When we were in seminary, most of us clergy were taught to preach on only ONE of the Scripture lessons, because that way we can focus entirely on one particular point for our sermons.

Well, while I do want to focus on Jesus' comments in the Gospel about faith, and also upon Paul's remark to Timothy about the same subject, I couldn't help but be struck by a few of the lines from this morning's lesson from the Book of Lamentations.

A while ago, I had occasion to visit Deaconess Anne House on Sullivan Street, in Old North St. Louis, where the Episcopal Service Corps interns live during their year of discernment and work in St. Louis.

It so happened that my trip to Deaconess Anne House took me through a large chunk of north St. Louis, the part which is south and east of us here at St. Barnabas. If you haven't traveled down that way in a while, you might be surprised at the desolation you will encounter. Entire square blocks in that part of the city are simply empty, and the houses are completely gone, except for small piles of rubble here and there.

How struck I was then to read the opening lines from Lamentations, a book of five poems on the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!" How lonely also is this large portion of north St. Louis, an area that was also once full of people. How sad that so many homes and businesses which were once vibrant, and which housed and employed so many people, are simply gone. And, whatever you think about Paul McKee's on-again, off-again plans to revitalize this area, the current state of it is, in the further words of Lamentations, "wormwood and gall."

But that same responsive portion of Lamentations contains some words of hope, which I pray will also apply to the north St. Louis area southeast of us, and to the people who still live there. "...this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope; the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; [and] GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS." Yes, I hope that, somehow and sometime, rebirth and regeneration will come to north St. Louis, and to its residents. "The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him." And so we **will** wait for the Lord's good time, and we **will** trust in the Lord's steadfast love that never ceases.

### **PAUSE**

That word TRUST brings me to the other part of my sermon, which also asks a question, although this time, it's a question I hope to answer. The question is, "What is this thing we call 'faith'?"

I believe there are some common misconceptions about what faith really is, and maybe this morning's Gospel reading even gives life to some of those misconceptions. We hear the apostles asking Jesus to "Increase our faith." This request comes right after Jesus has told them that they must forgive each other without limit (seven times a day). So I'm not surprised that they ask for additional strength to accomplish this.

But Jesus' response, I think, might be a tiny bit misleading if we're not careful in how we hear that response. Jesus says, if you recall, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." The misleading part here, I think, is that some people see faith as a sort of magic power. "If I only have enough faith, I can be cured of my illness.....or I can get this person to marry me.....or I can become rich." These people see faith as a weapon that gives them power to use in this world; "If only we believe!" I don't think this is what Jesus is trying to tell us here. I think that the mulberry tree, a relatively large tree with an extensive root system, jumping up and planting itself in the sea, is telling us that our faith, our trust in Jesus and the God who sent Jesus, will allow amazing things (beyond our conception) to happen. Genuine faith, in other words, can bring about truly unexpected things. But NOT magic tricks to amaze our friends!

## PAUSE

I think another misconception about faith is fostered by what the priest actually says right after the sermon: "Let us now stand and affirm our *faith* in the words of the Nicene Creed." Many of us think that faith, in this context, simply means the assenting to some set of truths. "We believe in one God....." Or, to put it another way, we think that the set of doctrines and dogmas we "believe in" is the "faith". But how DRY is that!?!

No, I'm here to say that faith is really something that's all about relationship.....relationship to God, to Jesus Christ. Do I trust in God's word? Do I believe, do I trust that Jesus, as he promised just before he left this earth, "will be with us until the end of the age"? THAT's the kind of faith that will keep me going through all kinds of problems and difficulties. THAT's the kind of faith that means I HANG IN THERE, no matter how bleak things may look.

That's the kind of faith Abraham had; he hung in there, trusting in the promise of God, even though he was a hundred years old when God told him he would have an heir and become father of a great nation. Paul tells us, in his letter to the Romans, that "no distrust made [Abraham] waiver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ..." Abraham's faith, Paul goes on to say, "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Not doing good works, not affirming a set of doctrines, but HANGING IN THERE, *trusting*; that's what made Abraham righteous and great.

### **PAUSE**

So, sisters and brothers, like Abraham, our "father in the faith," we too are called to hang in there, to trust the promise of God no matter what goes on around us. In that response (also from the Book of Lamentations) which we recited earlier this morning, there's a Hebrew word, *chesed*, which we translate into English as "steadfast love": "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, ..." In other words, we have the firm and dependable (steadfast) love of God to rely upon, to trust in, and that's what faith is all about: *trusting* that God will never, ever abandon us.

### **PAUSE**

Finally, I want to leave you with an admonition, from Paul's letter to Timothy which we heard this morning. Paul reminds Timothy of his "sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." If there is any responsibility that we should take to heart, it is this responsibility to pass on FAITH to our children and to our grandchildren. There is no greater gift that we can give them than to teach them to have that relationship with God and Jesus where we trust the promise of God and rely on God's *chesed*, God's dependable and reliable and everlasting love. Think about that responsibility, sisters and brothers, and let us ask ourselves this morning how good a job we're doing in passing along our faith --- even if it's no bigger than a mustard seed.

### **AMEN**