

Life in the Spirit Session 2 Teaching and Witness

Love of the Father – Salvation

Welcome back for the second session of Life in the Spirit! I hope you all had a fruitful peaceful and blessed 2 weeks using the prayer card and participants Got Spirit to reflect on God's unconditional love for each one of us.

Living in the Kingdom through Faith

Last week we shared about the importance of deciding to make our relationship with God the center of our life – “seeking first the Kingdom of God.” This session will consider how we begin to allow our relationship with God to transform our lives. The **decision** to live out our baptism is the beginning; acting on that decision makes it effective in our everyday lives. Like a decision to go on a diet, the **decision** itself is necessary, but it only has effect when we begin the diet.

Jesus said, “Unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matt 18:3) By the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus was referring to God's reign over our lives here on earth. In Luke 17:21 “The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, “Lo, here it is! Or ‘There !’ for behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

Jesus teaches that Faith is more than merely believing in God. Little children do more than just believe in their parents – they trust in them for every necessity in life. Jesus says that this same element of deeply rooted trust is necessary for us to enjoy the fullness of a relationship with God. Every relationship, whether with humans or with God, requires trust: where there is no trust there is no relationship. Trust brings our faith from an intellectual exercise of mere belief to a personal relationship with God.

Many of us say we trust in God, when in fact we only believe in Him. Faith is trust which shows itself in acting upon that trust.

There is a story about two friends who went on a vacation to the Grand Canyon. The first was a very excitable type; the second more subdued. Arriving at the Grand Canyon, they went to a scenic lookout and took in the panorama.

Lenny and Kate act out the story.

God says to us, “Do you really, really believe? Then get in!” We regularly profess our belief in God (every Sunday in the Creed) but when it comes to acting upon that belief, we hesitate. If we really believe in God, who became man, who died for our sins, who rose from the dead and is alive today, can we trust him enough to act upon it. I recently read some statistics about Catholics who receive the Eucharist and only 30% of

those receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. To me that is faith without trust.

Jesus calls us to act upon this faith in Matthew 6:25-27,31-32. Passage in book p.28.

Like little children, we are called to act upon our faith in trusting God. At times, God calls us to trust Him more deeply in specific ways. To some of us, this type of trust may seem like foolishness or irresponsibility. It is not when God calls us in specific circumstances.

In thinking about this teaching and my own experience, I thought about an article I read by Joyce Rupp called "Hearts on Fire". She uses fire to describe the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus and God the Father always calling is to be with them. There are so many references to the fire of the Holy Spirit. There is a fire burning within all of us. It is the fire of the Holy Spirit which was enkindled in us at our baptism. As I reflect on my life, I can say that for a good part of my life the flame was just smoldering. Some people fight the flame afraid of trusting God to make that smoldering flame burn brightly. I was one of those people who thought I was doing just fine on my own. I kept God at arm's length. God and prayer were my spare tire instead of the steering wheel of my life. I did not come from a particularly religious family. As a child, we went to Mass but in my teen years we stopped going. When I was in college, my father got sick. He had coronary heart disease and was in danger of dying, so I made a deal with God. Good thing God has a sense of humor! I told Him I would go back to Mass on Sundays if He would let my father live. Open heart surgery in the 70's was a new procedure and risky. God and I both kept our end of the deal. My father made it through the surgery and I went back to Sunday Mass, even though I did not seem to get anything out of going to Mass. My fire was still just smoldering. Life was going along but I felt empty for a long time.

Then God put a new friend in my life. Jane was different. There was something about her that I wanted. It took a long time for me to realize what it was about her that was so attractive and unlike other people.

Joyce Rupp identifies people like Jane as people whose hearts are on fire for God. They exhibit certain characteristics – they are courageous truth seekers, willing to stand up for what they believe. Theirs is a passionate single-heartedness based on a longing for God and the things of God. They have deeply compassionate hearts, filled with integrity and goodness. They know what they believe and cannot be swept away by the whims of the world, the media or trends to other faiths. They are humble people who acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses. They recognize that God gifts them and works through them. They allow the fire to grow stronger in them, they become catalysts for fire in others hearts. They take risks and show courage with their faith. Goodness attracts goodness. Fire leaps from heart to heart.

St. Paul describes this brightness to the early Corinthians when he says, "We reflect like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, and we grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into that image that we reflect; this is the work of the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Cor.3:18)

This transformation does not happen instantly or painlessly. It is not automatic. People endure struggles and pain and respond to those situations with openness and trust in God. My friend had difficulties but believed in the power of God's will for her life and responded not with anger and blame but with Joy and thanksgiving. She invited me to go to daily Mass. I even went to confessions after 16 years. The Holy Spirit was showing me areas in my life that needed healing. I was very nervous about going to confession, but it was the best thing I could have done. I felt free and the empty feeling began to fill with peace, joy and thanksgiving. I was beginning to understand what it was that I was missing. It was a relationship with God. I was still not totally convinced that Jesus was God at that point. He was certainly an important figure in history but God? The flame of change was beginning and I knew that I would never go back. I began to see the Holy Spirit at work in my life. Scripture had more meaning, prayer became a part of my life, I loved silence and quiet. I began to discern the things that were of God and those that were not. Jane invited me to join her at a Pentecost rally at a stadium in RI. It was amazing and awe inspiring with thousands of Christians participating in song, praye, praise and Mass. After Communion I remember singing the song, "Lord I Believe" and while singing the song I consciously confirmed in my mind and heart that Jesus was truly the Son of God. At that moment I felt something pass through me from my friend's hand that I was holding into the center of my body and out through my other hand. I think I was holding the hand of another person who was next to me. I wept not with sadness but with joy. I asked Jane if she felt it as well and she did not. I felt the desire to serve God in some way. As we left the stadium I asked God, "What would you like me to do?" I knew the answer. It was to teach CCD. God knew that the best way for me to learn and stay connected to my faith was to teach others which I did in the Confirmation program here at St. George's for 25 years. Being involved in my church community keeps the fire burning within me. I can keep my focus on Jesus rather than on myself or the many distractions in life that steal my focus. I made my Life in the Spirit Seminar shortly after that Pentecost Mass. God calls us to trust Him in specific ways to enable us to trust Him for the greater spiritual needs of our lives.

To be able to act upon our trust , we must be convinced of God's love for us. Little children are able to trust their parents for their most basic needs because they are convinced that their parents love them. It is our knowledge of God's love for us which enables us to trust Him. Many of us cannot act upon our faith in God because we are not convinced of His love. Just as little children grow into adolescents who sometimes

question their parents love (If you really loved me, you would let me...) so we sometimes question God's love for us, (If God really loved me why did he allow this to happen? Why doesn't he answer my prayers? Some of us carry hurts and disappointments from our human relationships; we have trusted others and have been deeply hurt. Therefore, we find it difficult to believe in and trust in God's love for us.

Jesus, in His life, teaching and ministry, reveals to us the fullness of the Father. Perhaps the clearest description of the Father is the image Jesus describes in the story of the Prodigal Son. Read Luke 15:11-24.

Often, we read the parable focusing on the image of the son, but Jesus also reveals a great deal about the Father. Jesus contrasts how a human father would react to the son with how our Heavenly Father responds to us. The Father does not hesitate to give the son his full inheritance. Even when the son turns his back on his father and squanders his inheritance, the Father is anxiously awaiting his return. The father does not remain cold and dispassionate but emotionally runs to his son and embraces him. Without threat of punishment, the father restores the son to full life in the family.

Jesus makes it clear that our image of the Father is far from what the Father is truly like. We often see God as cold, unemotional and distant: but Jesus shows that he is in fact a warm, compassionate Father. We may see God as being more concerned about His image, that we treat Him with the dignity He deserves; yet Jesus portrays Him as being more concerned about our welfare than His dignity. For many, God seems to be more concerned about commandments and laws, ready to punish any infraction; but Jesus describes His Father as anxious to forgive.

When we begin to see God the Father as the loving, compassionate Father revealed by Jesus, we can begin to trust in His love. While it is healthy and proper to respect, honor and have "fear of the Lord," these should flow from our unwavering knowledge of His love for us.

The Father desires that we be convinced of His totally unconditional love – and He has already done everything necessary to prove His great love for us. From Romans 5:8 , *God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,*

In John 3:16 God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life.

We have the greatest proof of the Father's love in His sending His Son, Jesus, to live among us, to take our sins upon Himself and die on the Cross, that we might be restored to a relationship with the Father as Adam and Eve enjoyed before their disobedience. Jesus put everything back in right order by His life, death and resurrection. This is the ultimate proof of His love:

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friend.” (John 15:13)

We are invited to believe in this unfathomable love – to trust in One who loves us this much – to act upon that trust, even for our greatest needs.

Discussion Sharing

Prayer Experience - The Bridge (Jay)

Time for reflection. Quiet music (Mike)

Response prayer- ALL

Closing - Prayer card of the week. Journal Confession offered next week. Guides in their folders to take home .