

A FEW SMALL GREEN APPLES

FAITHFULNESS

The term "faithfulness" in the fruit of the Spirit by that name, could have different meanings for Christians. For me it means living out ones Faith in God either in everyday life or in the midst of a crisis in life. The word Faith means something specific and special for me in this context. For me it is a deep sense of belief in God that supports and sustains the person, unshakably. I especially do not mean this in an intellectual sense but rather as a conviction that possesses the heart as well as the mind. Even a child can and does display this fruit of the Spirit. Jesus must have had this in mind when he told his disciples, "...Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a child, shall not enter it." This fruit of the Spirit may also come to us as an answer to prayer. Let me share two stories that illustrate both of these themes.

The first story concerns our daughter when she was eight years old. We had received word that my a father-in-law had just died. He had suffered a stroke some nine years before and survived only after brain surgery. This had left him paralyzed and mute, confined to a wheel-chair for the rest of his life. My mother-in-law did manage to keep him at home and we saw him at all of our family get-togethers. Thus our daughter Cathy had only known her grandfather in this condition. Of course she heard all the stories told at the gatherings of how much fun and how lively a person grandpa had been. At any rate, his death wasn't expected and yet was not a big surprise either. Still it was an emotional shock for all of us at first. We quickly made arrangements to leave, packed, and in a short time were in our car for the hour long drive to Champaign. There was no talking in the car for the first several minutes of the drive. My wife was near tears and our sons, then 10 and 11, were unusually sober and quiet. I'd already said what words of comfort I could before we left home. In this midst of this scene, 8 year old Cathy leaned over the front seat and put her little hand on her mother's shoulder. We'll never forget the gently spoken words. She said, "Mom, you don't have to cry,

grandpa is with God. He can talk again; he can walk again." It was a true case of "out of the mouths of babes." Her simple "words of faith" were enough to change the mood in our car and helped us through the days ahead. They have continued to be a reminder of Faith for us.

The second story concerns a parishioner from my very early ministry. She was a retired college professor and a lifelong church member. Everyone admired her for her success, her strong character and her commitment to her church. She had gone into the hospital for tests after some weeks of not feeling well and of losing weight. Nevertheless the news came as a terrible shock to her to learn that she had cancer and it had spread to several organs in her body. Her condition was beyond either surgery or chemotherapy. Her first reaction was one of anger, and she went into an immediate depression. One couldn't blame her, yet it seemed so out of character to all who knew and loved her. As the assistant priest in the parish it was my turn to visit her in the hospital the day after the terrible news had been delivered.

The rector had warned me about her depression, telling me that she may not want a visit. He was right. When I walked into the room, after first knocking announcing myself, she told me to go away and turned her face away from me. I asked if I could at least say one prayer with her and she answered with an emphatic NO!; not even a "no thank you." The rector and I talked this over later that same day. He had known her for many years and was naturally quite disturbed over this turn of events. He decided right then that we had to take some drastic and dramatic action to deal with it. He asked me to vest in cassock, surplice and stole, as he did the same. I had never before made a hospital visit in full clerical vestments so it felt both strange and a bit embarrassing. My boss was determined to put out all stops and thus make an impression. He informed me that we were going to the hospital and do a special service of the Laying-On of Hands and Anointing the Sick. We went into her room thus dressed and so caught her by surprise that she didn't protest. And I have to admit here that while I admired the rector for taking this kind of dramatic action, I at that moment

in time was not sure what I expected, or worse, even if I did expect anything to come of it. Perhaps it was because of my youth and inexperience, but I felt this was over my head. It may also have been another example of our Lord's saying: "O ye of little Faith".

The very next day we received a call at church early in the morning from the head nurse. She asked if we could come to; the hospital right away, without giving an explanation over the phone. Naturally we feared that our parishioner had taken a turn for the worse. Imagine our surprise then to find her sitting up in bed, smiling, welcoming us warmly and cheerfully dressed in a bed-jacket. The nurse had called because there had been such a dramatic turnaround in her attitude and demeanor.

She was indeed now eager to visit with us and share something with us and had asked the nurse to call us as well. She had not shared the reason with the nurses, which she then did share with the two of us. She said that when we had left her after our service the day before she had felt very angry about what we had done. In fact, she had closed her eyes tightly as if to shut the whole world out. Then, and she really could not explain it, but she suddenly had this overpowering feeling that someone had come into her room. It did not seem to be her own will making her do so, but she opened her eyes. Standing at the foot of her bed she saw a vision of Jesus. She told us that he didn't say anything to her, just stood there with arms spread out as if open to her. In seconds the whole experience was over and she was alone again. She was left with what she described as a inner sense of peace, and that in turn gave her an acceptance of her terminal illness. She told us calmly that she now knew that our prayers for her had been answered, and thanked us and asked us to pray with her again. In just a few weeks she did die. In that space of time she ministered in a remarkable way to a good many people, including me. And it was all because of the gift of Faith she had received that day. It made a believer out of me.

I must also go on to say this. It is important to make clear that the fruit of Faithfulness has to do with everyday living as well as with crisis and death, as had been just described. Our middle child, our son Chad, is a good example of that faithfulness that

shows itself in lifelong, regular worship. Like his mother, he never had to be coaxed or cajoled to attend church or church school. People shouldn't expect children to actually like going to church just because their father is the pastor. He was always ready, willing and eager, participating in the service as well. In his college years away from home he was just as faithful and regular in attendance, and there too served at the altar. He has continued this in his adult years and has the admiration of the people in this congregation. My wife and I have been very proud of him for this model of faithfulness. As I write of it, I only wonder why I've never said so to him directly. He wouldn't think it necessary but I know that I should!

My own story of faith working in my life is a final example. Earlier I wrote about experiencing a "call" to be a priest at the age of 16. My parish priest was eager to foster this goal and wanted to assist in any way he could. There were no resources from my family for a college education and he knew that. Father Hilbish did a bit of research in my behalf and discovered that an Episcopal Church college in Gambler, Ohio had a special scholarship for an Illinois student who though needy showed special promise. This particular scholarship provided room and board, tuition and book expenses for four years. Clearly this opportunity seemed like it was a "sign from heaven." I was in the top ten in my high school class so met the academic qualifications, and certainly was in financial need.

We sent my application to Kenyon College and received a letter back inviting me to take a competitive exam in Rockford, IL in mid February. That city was only a bit more than a hour's drive so it seemed like another good sign. A friend of mine agreed to drive me there if I would pay for the gas and the price of a lunch. Everything was working out perfectly. I was very excited and a bit nervous as we set out on a dark and rainy Saturday morning for that drive. Part way there the rain began to freeze and the road was beginning to ice over. Some thirty minutes into our trip on this curvy road, which followed the bends of the Rock River the icy conditions proved too much. The car went off the road and down an embankment and head-on into a tree, just a few feet

from the river itself. In that we were lucky not to go into the river. My friend was knocked unconscious but did stay in the car. Luckily he only suffered a very bad bump on the head and was not hospitalized. On the other hand, I went flying out of the car, the weight of my body having broken open the passenger side door (There were no seat belts in general use in 1954, or in 1936 model Chevrolet's). I lay unconscious on the icy ground just a couple of feet away from the river. A farmer found us and called an ambulance.

The result was that I spent the next two weeks in a hospital in Rockford. My jaw had been broken and my body was bruised from the shoulder down to my ankles where I'd gone out the door. I had surgery on the broken jaw and therapy for the bruising. Obviously I missed out on the test for Kenyon's scholarship. Later that spring I decided to enlist in the Marine Corps with the knowledge that this would earn me rights for the Korean G.I. Bill benefits. The point that I want to make is that despite this setback in plans, I was no less determined and even more convinced that God still wanted me to be a priest. Father Hilbish was actually more upset about what happened that I was. He was philosophical about it and told me that if after three years in the Marines I was still convinced of my "call" it had to be right. What lay ahead was my tour of duty in the service, then college and seminary, and it certainly was not an easy road financially. But with the gift of Faith, for I never doubted that God would lead me, it didn't seem so hard.

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