



Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (C)
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
August 11, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato, Rector

†May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

I'd like to begin this morning by posing a question to overlay our reflection together: Is your, is our, faith living or on life-support?

Faith, a mysterious gift from God, lives within the context of a community of believers, a community called by God to put hopes and dreams into action. A community of faith works to live more fully into the reign of God in our midst. So, "Is your, is our, faith actively alive or on life-support?"

On Tuesday this past week, seven of us from St. Mark's attended a workshop sponsored by Pine Rest here in Grand Rapids. The workshop centered on houses of worship needing to assess, prepare and activate processes for safety and security measures. The mass shootings of last weekend in El Paso and Dayton combined to make 253 mass shootings in 2019 alone. A mass shooting is an event at which four or more people are killed.

The workshop at Pine Rest was led by a brilliant national leader in active shooter preparation and response training. The presenter employed an amazing PowerPoint replete with pithy detailed information.

We saw videos of simulated active shooter situations and footage of actual active shooter events. The videos were not for the faint of heart. The presenter led an interactive three hour workshop that moved each of us in a beautiful Pine Rest facility. The contradiction of the bucolic setting outside and the materials being covered inside was compelling.

St. Mark's has taken steps over the past two years to bring in professionals, to create a taskforce and to work toward a safety and security plan. We recognize that the plan, once finalized, will require a significant implementation process. As your Rector, this is a high priority for me. We *hope* to formulate a plan that will provide us with as much safety as possible.

"Hope" is a big and important word at St. Mark's and in each and every one of our lives. Here, hope is intimately connected with another important word, 'faith'. Both hope and faith require conviction.

The opening of today's Letter to the Hebrews contains one of the more provocative sentences in the Christian Scriptures: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That sentence is profound in what it implies on one level and what it might imply on other levels.

Parish leadership has faith that we will soon complete a safety and security plan. We have hope that the new children's formation program with Laura Kozminski and over fourteen volunteers will offer an exciting program for our little ones beginning next month. We have hope that the youth who we will prepare for Confirmation will be energized and motivated to take the next step in their spiritual journey. We have hope that the numerous parishioners in the Inquirers' Class will have a faith-filled experience. We have hope that the St. Mary's Garden project will unfold after two years of prayer and planning.

Like other aspects in the journey of the Christian life, the intersection of faith, hope and action is needed. We are called to live into the kingdom of God, the reign of God. We believe in the life-giving breathing reality of God alive in our midst through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Letter of James reminds us, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:26). A commentator once said that “Faith without works is a dead faith because the lack of works reveals an unchanged life or a spiritually dead heart... True saving faith will result in a transformed life. That faith is demonstrated by the works we do. How we live reveals what we believe and whether the faith we profess to have is a living faith.” (<https://www.gotquestions.org/faith-without-works-dead.html>) So friends in Christ, is our faith a vital life-changing faith?

I believe that we are here this morning to help ensure that our faith is living and breathing. We are here somewhat in anticipation of the opening of schools, colleges, universities and seminaries. On September 8, we will celebrate ‘Celebration Sunday’, and our program year will once again be set in motion. I believe we are here because our faith is important to us individually and in our life together.

Faith longs for nourishment, as we long to be transformed. As people of faith, we hope that the light of Christ will be ours and that that little ‘light of mine’ and of ours will enable us to put the faith we have into action.

Last week, I said that we don’t live in isolation from one another. It is no secret that the world has become a global society. What impacts one of us impacts all of us.

Diminishing ice of the polar ice cap, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the chopping down of the Amazon Forest and the attack on the mosque in Norway this weekend impact all of us. As we prayed last week, we clearly recognized that what happens to others impacts us all.

In the midst of the challenges of life, people of faith have faith. People of faith have hope. People of faith believe in the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s pleasure to give you the kingdom.” We believe that the kingdom of God is a place of peace, justice and love. Luke’s Gospel encourages us to prioritize the things of life, so that whatever happens in life, our faith will give us what we need to remain strong as followers of Jesus.

When we pray in this place, we pray from hearts nourished and fed by the Scriptures, the Eucharist and one another. I believe we are here because our combined prayer is more powerful than individual prayer. Our prayers knit us together in a fabric from which we gain strength and encouragement. During times of crises in life, the community gathered together can provide the hope we need to move forward.

Thank you for offering yourself to God on this day in your faith journey. As a community of faith, we hope and pray for ourselves and the world in which we live. We believe that God is with us, in us and through us. Stronger for having been here in prayer, we can go forth and put into action the faith we claim as our own. Amen.