Date: May 21, 2023 (Easter 7)

1. Texts: Acts 1:6-14; Ps. 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11.
2. Subject: discipleship.
3. Topic: faith through revelation.
4. Aim: encourage, inspire.
5. Proposition: "What we really know about God comes through faith."

# WE KNOW BY FAITH

"Mercifully give us faith to know…" Frequently the Sunday collects are read aloud and then immediately forgotten. It is not easy to focus on every word in every liturgy. We are committed to getting something out of the Bible readings, but the familiar parts like the creed or the Lord's Prayer tend to slip quickly from our minds. The Collects for the Day changes from Sunday to Sunday, but we just can't hold their complicated truths in our minds.

But today's collect calls for our closer attention. And we don't even have to understand the whole prayer. It's just this one phrase, "Mercifully give us faith to know…" It sounds very pious and so religious. But its ideas are central to the Christian faith.

You see, the important stuff that we know about God does not come through Bible studies or commentaries or book studies. After all, none of those things can actually prove anything about God. The Bible cannot prove that God exists. Our book studies can't prove that Jesus was God incarnate. None of us can actually prove that the Holy Spirit dwells in our human spirits. We can describe our experiences, but there's no means of proving anything. If there were concrete proofs which could be verified by independent means, then everyone would become Christian. The real stuff about God does not come from external sources of proof.

The real stuff comes from faith. We have faith that God exists. Our faith describes Jesus as God incarnate. It is by faith that we claim the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. "Mercifully give us ***faith*** to know…" It is actually by faith that we know anything about the reality and nature of God.

This faith is not the content of our confirmation classes or our Bible studies. Faith is an experience of God that changes who we are as human beings.

So, faith is a relationship with God. God relates to us, and we relate to him. In other words, God moves into our lives, and we move into God's life. Crucial in this is that God moves first. He's the one who knocks first on the doors of our souls. He asks for entry, and then we invite him in. Or, in other words, in a great heavenly ballroom, God extends his hand to us and asks, "Shall we dance?" Those of us listening to this sermon have said, "I've been waiting for someone to ask. I'd love to dance." Faith is the dance with God leading and we following.

We can outline this relationship of faith. Faith is characterized by love, trust, surrender and sacrifice. But, again, God moves first, even in faith.

God loves us, and it is by faith that we know this. He loves us not because of what we do or who we are, but despite both. He loves us because it is his nature to love his creation. God is love.

We move into God's love by loving him in turn. We have to be clear that this love is not really a matter of emotion. Divine love is the choice to put the health and well-being of the other ahead of your own. In God's love, he puts our eternal well-being ahead of his own identity as Trinity. He chose to put his own interior life at risk for our sake. God is love. And we choose to love him in return.

In this, God trusts us, and we trust him. That is, God entrusted his Son and his Church to us, and we trust God to be God for us. Trust is the choice to believe the best about the other and to act out of trust, despite what others may think or say. God entrusted his life to us, and we trust God with our lives.

Faith is also characterized by surrender, but as with love and trust, this surrender is mutual. God surrendered his power and authority, and his intimate relationships as Trinity. That's what freewill and the incarnation are all about. We surrender our futures to God, as we try to respond to God's call on our lives.

Lastly, faith is characterized by sacrifice. God's sacrifices for us are universally clear. God sacrificed his self-sufficiency by creating the universe. God sacrificed his power and authority by giving us freewill. God sacrificed the Christ, with such horrific and gruesome results.

In response, our faith calls us to sacrifice on behalf of God. We share our financial resources with the Church. We risk ridicule and rejection as we proclaim God. Some disciples will even sacrifice their lives for the sake of the gospel.

Faith is a relationship characterized by love, trust, surrender and sacrifice. God starts the dance of faith by inviting us to join him. He moves into our lives, and we move into his life. It is through this relationship that we know anything life-changing about God. It is faith that turns the statements of the Bible into realities in our lives. Because of God's prior movement and our response in faith, we believe in God and entrust ourselves to him.

Now, the phrase from the collect makes sense: "Mercifully give us faith to know…" In the collect we are asking God to move again into our lives so that we might perceive the truth to come, a truth that the world cannot know because "the world" exists outside the faith relationship with God. In the collect we ask God to be God for us, in that we ask him to be merciful to us and grant us the faith that will enable us to see some truth.

The truth we want to claim by faith is that Jesus the Christ will be with us to the end of our lives. Yes, the collect says, "…to the end of time." But it seems that the end of time for each one of us actually means the end of ***our*** time on earth. God's promise to us is that Christ will be with us no matter what until we make the transition to eternal life. In the collect we are praying for the necessary trust to believe that God will be with us no matter what our circumstances are. We are asking for the trust to believe in the sacrificing love of God for us.

And don't we all hunger for that faith, love, trust, surrender and sacrifice of God? Maybe even especially right now.

Let's pray again:

Almighty God,
you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ
with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven.
Mercifully give us faith to know
that, as he promised,
he abides with us on earth to the end of time;
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.  Amen.