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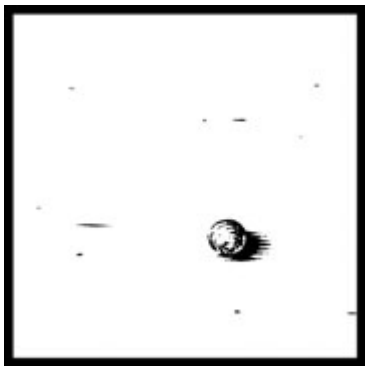
Go public with faith

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Oct. 5, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

In her book *Preaching from the Pew* (Geneva Press, 1998), social worker and author Patricia G. Brown, an elder of Kennedy Heights Presbyterian Church, insists that for faith to be authentic, it must "go public."

Faith is more than prayer. It is more than a profession of belief in God. Faith does not only speak about God or discuss what needs to be done. Faith becomes true when prayer and belief and talk are translated into actions that witness to the reality of God. Faith becomes real when, through our care and our service, the needy know compassion and realize their dignity before God and all others in the human community.



Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Habakkuk 1:2-3, 2:2-4

Psalm 95

2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14

Luke 17:5-10

When Jesus encouraged his disciples' growth in faith, he did not recommend that they enroll in special theology classes or commit themselves to a lifelong study of the law. Rather, he told them to live their faith. He urged them to move toward the service of others because of their relationship with him. If they had such faith, said Jesus, they could uproot mulberry bushes and move mountains (Matthew 17:20).

But even faith of this nature does not give cause to boast. No indeed, said Jesus; faith is God's gift, and even when we express it fully in our lives, we have done no more than our duty as disciples. Bass Mitchell suggests that in those times when our faith brings us the praise of others, it is better to defer to the One who gives faith, grace and all good gifts rather than ever to become satisfied with ourselves (*The Abingdon Preaching Annual*, Abingdon Press, 2000).

Habakkuk and all the prophets were quick to defer to God and relied on God in good times and in bad. The prophet's frustration is clear in today's first reading as he calls upon God to bring an end to a bad situation. His answer comes in the form of an oracle of salvation, which assures him that his faith will see him through.

God speaks similar words to each of us who rail at so many things that are wrong in our world. When we think we can no longer tolerate the violence, war, injustice, inhumanity, sickness, suffering and abuse of every kind, Habakkuk's words remind us that being just is better than being rash, and that faith can truly make a difference in our seemingly unfixable world.

Aware of the necessity of faith in an ever-expanding community, the author of today's second reading urged Timothy to stir the gift of faith into a flame, lest it be extinguished and the church be no more. No doubt the ancient author understood that if Timothy had fire in his belly, he could evoke similar fervor and faith in the members of his congregation. So often we hear that faith is not taught but caught. If faith does not become contagious, the survival of the community is in doubt.

As a pastor, it was Timothy's responsibility to keep the message of the Gospel pertinent so that one generation of believers could instill the message in the next generation, and so on, until all know what God has done for humankind in Jesus. This text, suggests William Cotton, could be a page from contemporary church experience (*The Abingdon Preaching Annual*, Abingdon Press, 2001). As we acknowledge shrinking membership in our churches, many ask, "Will the next generation have faith?" Even more to the point, however, is Walter Brueggemann's query, "Will the faith have children?" (*Hope Within History*, John Knox Press, 1988).

For years, parents consoled themselves with the idea that children who were estranged from the church would return when the time came for their own children to participate in the sacraments. But there are many who will remain disenfranchised because they never experienced any connection with the church to begin with. The seeds of the faith did not grow; they were never nourished. Therefore, we need many Timothys to herald, to preach, to teach, to guide, to encourage, to nourish and to challenge the generations yet to come.

We don't need to be ordained or professed in order to be a Timothy. We need only be committed to Christ and resolute in our determination that the Gospel be made known to the next generation. Witnessing to the good news with our lips and with our lives, each of us is challenged to go public with our faith so that all we do ignites the faith of those God puts in our path and fans it into a flame.

[Patricia Sánchez holds a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

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