

St. Martin's United Church
Sermon notes – April 8, 2018
“Faith”
Brian Walton

In 1974 I appeared before a United Church Committee known as the Interview Board. It was one of many consultations that a person had to endure to be accepted as a ministry candidate. I recall this particular interview because I was asked questions I hadn't anticipated about my personality, about issues of faith and about how I understood the practice of ministry. It was a lively discussion and I went home optimistic, that is, until I received the Interview Board's report. It stated that I was not being recommend me as a Candidate for Ministry at this time and that I should spend the next year reflecting upon the difference between a profession and a vocation. I was angered by the decision and frightened that my goal of becoming a minister was in jeopardy. Ironically, one of the people I consulted was Bob Thompson, then minister of St. Martin's Church. He was to be appointed the new chairperson of the Interview Board and he assured me that I would not be found wanting in a future interview. Nine months later I was declared a Candidate for Ministry; however; the question about profession and vocation has remained with me ever since.

In this morning's gospel lesson, we discover that before Thomas is prepared to make his vocational commitment as an apostle of the risen Christ, he wants proof of the resurrection. It is not good enough that others told him they had met the risen Christ - he had to see for himself. We hear his declaration again this morning, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in his side, I will not believe.”

We might imagine that the author of this story is living in a time when doubt is common. Jesus' crucifixion had occurred about sixty years earlier and the expected second coming of Christ had not happened. Doubt was creeping into the community. The writer uses Thomas' words of doubt to encourage his readers. Christ appears and invites Thomas to physically touch the holes left by the nails and the wound left by the sword. After doing so Thomas declares, "My Lord and my God!"

It is the high moment in the story, with Jesus offering up encouragement to all future generations of believers: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." I have been thinking about this second category of people – those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe. We have not seen corpses resurrected; we have not experienced the dead talking to us. We have not seen, yet we are here. There is something in this story, the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, that has so captured us that while we have not seen, yet we believe. Some would describe this as a 'leap of faith.'

The term 'leap of faith' is attributed to an old Danish philosopher named Soren Kierkegaard (show slide of statue) who lived in the second half of the 19th century. He argued: Imagine you were ready to jump off a cliff and wondered if someone would catch. All reason and evidence suggests that you should not jump, yet Kierkegaard argued you can only know for sure if you jump. (show leap of faith slide) He argued, to really know something, you have to commit yourself. So it is with faith. We can discuss the life of Jesus, we can debate the reality of the resurrection but it is not until we leap into the life of faith that we can truly know what it

means. One writer describes it as “casting off the bondage of logic and the tyranny of science” and going with the heart.

This week the news has reminded us of the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The day before he was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee he gave one of the most well remembered speeches of his life. I have selected an excerpt for us this morning. (play clip here) His dream was an act of faith, an act of faith inspired by the Christian story. He had no evidence that his dream would come true, in fact the contrary. Segregation laws continued to exist, the Klu Klux Klan and the hate-mongers continued to intimidate and kill African Americans, years of economic deprivation, and an intransigent government constantly thwarted the civil rights movement. But Martin Luther King lived his faith and refused to be deterred by the evidence. King offered a version of Kierkegaard’s wisdom when he said, “Faith is taking the first step, even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” His life was defined by faith – faith in the gospel and faith in the outcome of the civil rights movement. (move to black slide)

I think the Interview Board was right – I needed to think about the difference between profession and vocation. As a child I had seen our minister mount the steps to a lofty pulpit; I had seen him teach and I had seen him comfort people and I wanted to do the same. The Interview Board was telling me that while they hoped I might learn the skills of oratory, of teaching, of skilled pastoral care that skills alone could not sustain a calling to ministry. Only the way of faith could sustain a vocation. Faith in the love of God and the witness of Jesus had to define my life. Many of you know about vocation -the driving force that is more than the best of your skills. Ask the teacher who volunteers countless hours on the

football field or in the band room – teaching is a way of life. Ask the nurse who cares tenderly for her ailing neighbour or dresses the scraped knee of the child next door – nursing is a way of life. How would you answer the question if it were put to you – is your Christian life a profession or a vocation? Perhaps the question might better be put, is your Christian life a hobby or a calling? Is church a place for volunteering your time or for changing the way you live in the world? Do you have a dream, inspired by the life of Christ, to change the little piece of the world where you work and live? Faith is for life, not just Sunday mornings.

[[Lloyd LeBlanc was the father of one of the children killed by Patrick Sonier – a true story depicted in the movie, “Dead Man Walking”. Lloyd LeBlanc spoke about identifying his son’s body and, standing in the morgue he began somewhat automatically to recite the Lord’s Prayer. When he got to the line, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” he stopped wondering, in these circumstances, if he could speak those words. He writes, “I suddenly realized they had taken my boy, they were not going to take this to.” In those most desperate moments he recognized the faith that he had valued for so many years was there to sustain him and he needed to cling to it even more that night.]]

A few weeks ago my best friend’s daughter took her own life. I grieved deeply for my friend and sought to support him in any way I could. After a few days he asked if I would conduct a memorial service, in a rented hall, near the airport. I agreed immediately but began to sense an uneasiness in me. His daughter, like so many her age, was not involved in the Christian faith and I did not know if bringing my faith to this situation was appropriate. In those moments I realized that faith in the God of Jesus

Christ defines my life and I felt like I had nothing to offer, if I couldn't acknowledge this. When I asked my friend what he hoped for in the memorial he stated he wanted testimony to the goodness of his daughter's life and a few prayers. I suddenly felt able to respond – I could speak about the God who sustains me and offer this God – albeit in subtle and sensitive ways – to this hurting family. I thought back four decades and realized that the Christian life had become a vocation - the orienting factor for my living.

All of us who have found love and hope in the Christian way know that behind the skills, the volunteering, the hours of effort in church kitchens or garage sales, in study groups or in choirs, there exists a faith that shapes us and sustains us such that in life, in death, in life beyond death we trust in a Love greater than our own. Thanks be to God. Amen.