

## We Walk by Faith

Romans 8:26-39

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 13:31-35, 44-52

Pentecost 7A

Back in 1915, N.S. Haynes published a book called "History of the Disciples in Illinois." The article about First Christian in East St. Louis mentions that we were organized in 1890 by J.T. Boone. It describes the beginning like this: "The church had what most people call a feeble beginning. There were 8 women, residents here at the time, who had been Disciples at various other places. These united their heads and their hearts to have a church home that should be Christian only. A third-floor hall was secured and Minister Boone, then a resident of St. Louis, conducted a two weeks' meeting with 30 additions. Then the 38 members organized and moved to another hall. Next, meetings were held in a schoolhouse until the growing congregation moved into their chapel at 7<sup>th</sup> Street and St. Clair Avenue. There they met for 19 years. In 1910 they moved into the beautiful modern edifice at the corner of Washington Place and Belmont Avenue. The church has had 15 pastors, the present minister being Meade E. Dutt. There is a strong Papal following in this city, yet this church has moved steadily forward. Many things have happened in their Christian service which have caused their hearts to rejoice."<sup>i</sup>

That was a story about the first quarter-century of our shared existence. I trust that there aren't any charter members who remember those days. Yet still, it is part of our journey. Our spiritual ancestors walked by faith and the journey they began continues in us. Down through the years you have been a congregation that has sought to walk by faith. In the 1950s, First Christian planted the seed of what was to become Hillcrest Christian in Belleville. In 1970 they moved into this building. In 2003, First and Hillcrest were reunited. It's been a walk in faith.

I want us to think for a minute of what Jesus said in his parables that we heard this morning, and then about Paul's words about the Spirit leading us and keeping us close to God, and to see what they have to say about the journey we've taken through time here at Crossroads Christian Church.

Most of the parables of Jesus, including the ones we heard today, are called Kingdom parables. Their theme is the coming of God's reign. Back then, it would have been considered sacrilegious by the Jewish authorities and treasonous by the Roman-backed government to suggest that things could be different, that there was an alternative way of living, a way more in touch with the will of God. So Jesus would speak in parables to tell of a hidden, subtle new way of living, filled with the power of God's love, a kingdom that wasn't of this earth, a kingdom that would grow not by armed might, but by people living out the love that God had given them. Jesus used stories so that the ordinary people would understand, and he knew that the high and the mighty would not. He used everyday images, things that we had all seen before, and then he would let people draw their own conclusions.

Did you ever, as a child, plant a seed in a paper cup, perhaps at Vacation Bible School, perhaps at grade school, then watched it anxiously, to see if it would grow? Nothing but dirt the first day, and the second, but then one day a tiny seedling would sprout up. You couldn't see it grow, but each day it would be a little bit bigger. Maybe your mom or dad would help you transplant it into your yard, and eventually you would have a flower, or maybe a tomato plant. It was like a miracle, for it was a miracle—a slow, quiet miracle. Under the ground, where we couldn't see, God had been at work. The seed, which looked like a dead little brown thing, divided, split open, sent out roots and shoots, then one day, there it was.

So Jesus talked about the mustard seed in God's good earth, germinating in God's own time, and then growing to produce something big. His word would take root in men's and women's hearts, and their lives would be different. They might actually start trying to replace pride and hurt with forgiveness; they might actually start to replace selfishness with compassion—not all at once, but bit by bit, like the seed, until eventually they would be living as God would have them, and produce wonderful crops of a whole new way of life. The mustard seed—one of the smallest seeds, something so small you could barely see it, something so unpromising you would think it was a piece of dust. But from it a huge shrub could grow, big enough for birds to find shelter. And then he talked about a woman using yeast in bread dough, where it worked unseen and within, to make a larger loaf.

So God's kingdom would grow not by revolution, but by transformation. Simple, ordinary people, like you and me, would live lives that were different, and people would notice. There's a hymn that we usually sing around thanksgiving, and it uses the same image that Jesus does."First the blade, and then the ear, Then the full corn shall appear. Lord of harvest, grant that we Wholesome grain and pure may be."<sup>iii</sup> (Henry Alford, 1810-1871).

The people who formed this church planted seeds of faith. When they might have gotten tired and discouraged, they didn't. When they might have given up, they didn't. So they planted the seeds of faith in their children, then their children's children, a few neighbors. They planted the seeds of faith, they nurtured the sprouts, they weeded the garden, they harvested the crops, and they replanted, time and time again, confession of faith by confession of faith, baptism by baptism, Sunday school class by Sunday school class, church dinner by church dinner, until here we are today. And we likewise have seeds to plant, to keep the faith fresh and

alive for new generations yet to come. Think for a minute of people who passed their faith on to you, parents, uncles, grandparents, teachers, preachers, youth sponsors. (pause) Name them to yourselves, but don't say the names out loud yet. Now let's all say, Thank you God, for—and you fill in the blank. Next, thank God for giving you the opportunity to let others know about how God has worked in your lives. Thank God for living in a free land, where you have the freedom to worship.

Back to our scriptures, Paul knew that God through Christ had the power to transform lives. Hadn't Paul himself gone from being a mean-spirited bigot, a violent zealot eager to beat down others who disagreed with him, to being an equally committed apostle of Christ's love? The passage we heard today from Romans 8 is one that I almost always read at funerals, but we need to hear it other times, too. When we are joined in Christ, nothing can break our relationship with God. God's Spirit searches us out; pleads for us; helps us become more Christ-like. If God is for us, who can be against us? If God is for us, who can be against us? Paul lists one thing after another that can try to separate us from God—trouble, distress, famine, danger, sword, and we can our own fears—divorce, job loss, bankruptcy, disease, rejection, but says NO to all of them. Nothing—Nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Because of this, we walk by faith, knowing that we don't walk alone. We don't know where God will lead us. But I do know that it is God who is leading us on our faith journeys. We walk by faith, trusting our Guide. We walk by faith, like when we were little children and hoped each day that the little seed in the paper cup would send a shoot up through the dirt, and a plant would grow. We walk by faith, as we let God's transforming power work within us as individuals and among us as a church. This church has had a long history of trusting that God will guide it, and making decisions

accordingly. You have many strengths and resources, a beautiful facility, faithful and friendly members, both diversity and depth of belief, and a profound commitment to mission. You reach out in love rather than shrink back in self-protection. All that goes to show me that in the future, you will continue to walk by faith, as you try to be faithful to God's call to be a new creation. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>i</sup> N.J. Haynes, *History of the Disciples in Illinois*, Standard, 1915, p 39.

<sup>ii</sup> Henry Alford, "Come, Ye Thankful People Come," *Christian Worship: A Hymnal*, No. 593.