

More Than a Handful

Years ago, when the Betty Crocker Company first began selling their cake mixes, they offered a product which only needed water. All you had to do was add water to the mix which came in the box, and you would get a perfect, delicious cake every time.

It bombed. No one bought it and the company couldn't understand why, so they commissioned a study which brought back a surprising answer. It seemed that people weren't buying the cake mix because it was too easy. They didn't want to be totally excluded from the work of preparing a cake; they wanted to feel that they were contributing something to it. So, Betty Crocker changed the formula and required the customer to add an egg in addition to water. Immediately, the new cake mix was a huge success.

Sometimes it seems like just the opposite is true when it comes to faith. Many look for a simple "mix" which one accepts and believes which then produces the "perfect, delicious believer". Yet God's Word echoes over and over that faith is about responding. God, in God's wisdom, didn't make it too easy; God understands and provides for that deep need we have to contribute. God does and provides all that is necessary, and then invites all to partake as they choose. It is a critical but difficult aspect of our faith that God always loves, always provides, always pursues, calls, invites, beckons --- regardless of what or any response we humans may display. Embrace, ignore, attempt to bargain with, reject, none of these changes God. They only affect what and how one experiences, understands and copes with whatever situation or circumstance life brings.

The "church" of the last 15 or so years has really focused on the human action of seeking God. While this has been an important aspect in reaching those who did not grow up with church as an integral part of their lives, the Bible puts the human action of seeking in its proper place; secondary and predicated upon understanding that it is God who seeks people, rather than waiting for people to seek God. If anything, human beings have a history of trying to avoid God rather than seeking God! For seeking God takes all that we have and all that we are. Seeking God is not something which can be relegated to an hour or two a week. Seeking God is not something we can keep on our own terms. What it is -- is embarking on a journey with one purpose in mind, to walk in God's will and way. The way is likened to allowing God to cleanse us and make us new; not just once but on a reoccurring, as close as humanly possible continuous basis. This need for turning to and letting go to God is also likened to new birth, to recreation, to transformation, to being made new.

The way is addressed by Jesus in the passage shared today. It is not an easy, uplifting passage. It does not make one-sided, God do for me, promises. The language is hard to hear -- dying, death. It is a truth which we humans cannot experience, until we submit to dying to self. We may see others whose life and living seem to be marked by a level of faith which transforms the normal self-centered, self preservation attitudes, such faithful living can seem almost impossible, not to mention reckless.

Jesus used a biblical image of the seed, of how the individual seed must die for a greater harvest to be realized. We can "get it" to a point, we can test it out, plant a seed and see the plant. Yet our "this side of heaven" experiences do not allow for the testing and tasting of the truth of humanity's dying to live.

A part of the difficulty is that we hear death and dying and think of physical. Although our temporary physical bodies are very real to us, death encompasses much more. Understanding dying and living is one of those areas where God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not ours. Ours are temporary, shadowy, through a mirror dimly. God's calls us to accept what we can only partially understand and must mainly receive by faith -- That life in its purest, truest sense is unity with God, and death is denial or rejection of God. We can be very "alive" physically but dead to God's presence, with the place we find ourselves on the continuum of true life ranging from one end to the other and continually changing.

When Jesus calls us to die so that we might live, he speaks from the Godly and not the human definition of death. When Jesus speaks of dying to self it has little or nothing to do with the physical realm or reality. It means dying to selfishness. It means dying to "the big I," the attitude that I am going to live for me, my spouse and my family. It is a call to acknowledge that too easily we live as if "the purpose of my life is my self fulfillment and my experiencing all that life can give me."

The life which Jesus bids us let go of and leave is life is preoccupied with me and my happiness; where the preoccupation is with myself, my successes, my failures, and what other people are thinking about me; that I am the center of the universe.

This leads to a physical existence where one is paralyzed by his or her self-centeredness. But when life revolves around me, I am not really living at all. When that childish self-centeredness finally begins to die, finally I begin to live.

Jesus shared this important aspect of faith not as something new or radical. He was continuing the call of God throughout the ages:. Jesus was very familiar with the prophets who preceded him, including the words of Isaiah (*Isaiah 43:18-19*): *"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"*

Though not nearly as easy, thanks be to God, as a cake mix which only requires water, this letting go, living into the future, is not as difficult as we often make it. When we focus on all the individual "whats" which we struggle with giving up, with allowing or accepting change, they become overwhelming. Life often seems like it is filled to overflowing with changes, attitudes and people who challenge and disregard that which we hold dear. When we try to simply let go, we will always fail, always feel loss and irritation, and for every thing or instance we are able to let go, many more come tumbling after.

Yet, when we embrace that God can create in us a new heart, that the Spirit of Christ is in and among us, then we can trust, though not completely understand, that that is the source of letting go and of receiving life. As we open ourselves more and more fully to the God who loves, seeks and is always present for all, then we find fulfillment, peace and strength. We come to know, in heart as well as mind, that God is, and that that is enough.

Then rather than having our hands full with that which we are trying to hold, we can have open, uplifted hands which receive all God's goodness and allows it to overflow to others. May it be so!