

Shaking the Foundations:
For a different kind of faith
13 Pentecost C / Proper 16C

*HELP US LORD TO BE SO CONNECTED TO YOU THAT WE
MIGHT BECOME THE SERVANTS OF OTHERS.
TAKE OUR LIPS AND SPEAK THROUGH THEM,
OUR MINDS AND THINK THROUGH THEM,
AND TAKE OUR HEARTS, AND SET THEM ON FIRE. AMEN!*

“Lord, will only a few be saved?” Here is a tough question made important by Jesus disciples. They are worried whether they are going to make it into eternal life. Jesus only answer is to “Strive to enter through the narrow door.”

Faith takes a good deal of effort. “Strive” is a great word for us to hear that Jesus used. It is the Greek word “agonizesthe” from which our English word “agony” is derived. Luke seems to take this metaphor from the striving, wrestling, and combat in the Olympic Games. It is the same word used to describe Christ’s struggle in Gethsemane. Deliberate effort and focused devotion is likewise needed to get into the kingdom of God. Christian life is a daily struggle to rise to a higher spiritual plain. To those who would teach that the door to the kingdom of God is wide open Jesus delivers a crushing blow when he adds, “For many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.”

“Strive” rhymes with “drive.” The latter word “drive” or “driven” is a more modern term that reminds us of careers, of education, of traveling on the Interstate. It suggests a focus on getting to a destination. Whichever one you prefer “strive or drive” is an all out effort required to get through the narrow door before it gets shut... unless of course you believe that there is a door jam strategically placed just in case! Or perhaps we might hope for an illegal Inside Trader like on Wall Street to give us secret information so we can get to the Other Side. While this hard saying is hard to swallow the good news is that faith is not secret and faith cannot be bought.

Faith according to this gospel passage takes a driven approach to get through the narrow door spoken of by Jesus. But wait a minute! If God does not want anyone to perish as we can quote from the gospel of John, and he wants all to come to him, then why does he talk about a “narrow door?” This question gave ancient rabbis heartburn! They struggled with the number of God’s elect. If you think

that this hard saying of Jesus was put with Hebrews 12 to help us then let's see!

This third sermon on Faith in Hebrews makes a shift from the race run after the architect of our faith Jesus Christ. This latter part of the 12th chapter shifts to the faith of a new covenant with God. This new faith spoken by the author speaks more clearly of God's kingdom as a spiritual one rather than an earthly one that can be shaken apart. Comparisons are again made between the old and new covenants with the new covenant based on a faith that strives to take hold of what remains after the tangible things of earth are finished shaking.

I've never experienced a good shaking as in an earthquake. Those who have gone through a quake say it paralyzes you and it makes time stand still. Anything not tied down is thrown to the ground or to the floor of a house. Buildings are made "quake-proof" with certain standards that ensure the building will not collapse endangering more lives.

Storms have a way of shaking us and are more commonplace. In the bow of the USS Mississippi where my office was located every time the bow went over a 16 foot wave my office would shake and shudder, from port to starboard, and gravity would pull me down as I stood up to walk when the ship reached the trough of the waves bottom. After earthquake and storm alike, there is always some cleanup - human and otherwise. Many of our neighbors and friends have gone through a massive cleanup after the ten inches or more of rain Wisconsin experienced last week.

The nice thing about such experiences is that they test you and teach you what is strong and what is weak about a home, or a building or a boat. They also teach us about ourselves.

When I was in grade school I would help my father sift rock and pebbles out of dirt being used for seeding a new lawn. My dad would make his own sifter out of 2 X 6 boards, nail them into a frame and then nail half-inch metal mesh over the boards. There was another sifter that was finer for making topsoil. The sifter was placed on wooden horses and then the shovels would throw the rocky soil into the heavy mesh. Not much happened until steady pressure was applied and the rock and larger pebbles would separate from the dirt. I remember taking the mesh box and shaking the remaining lumps of dirt. What remained was good for further refining for grass or gardens to be planted or filler for holes in the ground.

In scripture we are told that God is sifting the earth, the things he created, so his people are better able to see what the kingdom will look like - a finished product if you will. God is refining the kingdom so

that what is left after a good shaking will be pure, holy and spiritual. Do people have a singular passion for God's kingdom today? Do they have a singular passion for his righteousness and justice? Perhaps it is so hard that few it is we find who truly hunger and thirst after Him.

Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962), world famous violinist of the 20th century, testified to this point when he said, 'Narrow is the road that leads to the life of a violinist. Hour after hour, day after day and week after week, for years, I lived with my violin. There were so many things that I wanted to do that I had to leave undone; there were so many places I wanted to go that I had to miss if I was to master the violin. The road that I traveled was a narrow road and the way was hard.'" *Source unknown*

He was a man of passion and philosophy who believed that "art ought to be a priesthood, and every artist should be a priest." **Amy Biancolli's *Fritz Kreisler: Love's Sorrow, Love's Joy*** (1998, Amadeus Press)

The same God we worship is the One who is called a consuming fire. He chooses not to consume us but he desires and feeds upon faith as an art that is desired above everything. In this relationship of faith, he has a much better way for us to enter his holy city. It is the way of a living faith. It is a faith that is alive, a faith that strives to enter through the narrow door, a faith that has substance and not just words, a faith that is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. It is faith that is driven.

By the faith of Jesus Christ may we be assured and be hopeful and be convicted of such mercy. And may we like Moses and Daniel know the fire that burns but does not consume. He is a fire that refines and leaves only the pure soul of one who loves God body, mind and spirit. Let us pray:

Dear God, lover of our souls, create in us new hearts, where the ancient faith of bold and courageous witnesses may flourish and grow. Use the topsoil given by your Son Jesus Christ, and plant our tiny seed of faith and let it be a tree where all people may come and find life. Amen.