

Add to your faith

Ken Taylor tells the story of a missionary friend who served in a country that, for many years, told its citizens that there was no God. His friend struck up a friendship with a highly educated man, and there came a time when God gave his friend the opportunity to share the gospel, the good news that is found in Jesus Christ. The good news, as many of us know, is good because of the word we just read: *grace*. The notion of grace can be traced to the words of the text, repeated twice: *has given us* (vss 3,4). If we want to know what God is like, these words say it all. Meanings for the group of words of which this is one include: "gift, bounty" (of God); "as a gift, without payment"; "undeservedly, without reason." When God gives, He is acting according to His nature. He gives for no reason but that that is the way He is.

After his friend told this professional the good news, the man said something surprising. "What you have told me cannot be true. If it were true, it is such good news that someone would have told this to me before."

The first step, from our point of view, is called *faith*. It is referred to in the very first verse. *To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours* (2 Pet 1:1). Faith, Peter reminds us, is received. It is a gift, coming from the bounty of God without payment, undeserved, without reason.

When Peter writes that faith is *as precious as ours*, he is stating that faith, as God's gift to us, makes us all equal. Paul, another writer, puts it in words this way. *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...* (Rom 3:22-23). Here I need to ask a very important question. Do we believe that there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God? Do we believe that there is no difference between us, none at all?

Some of us will have served last night at the community dinner, a wonderful expression of grace if there was any. "Free Supper" says the sign; and it really IS! People who otherwise can't afford it (whatever reason that may be), are served a nutritious supper at no charge. Perhaps in our minds we believe there's a difference between us and them; there is not.

Let's think together about this, because if we don't get this straight, we don't get it at all. How about the worst sort of person we can think of, the most profane, the most immoral who involve themselves not in criminal activities, but are very bad people, as we might view them. Let's name some of their sins: people with same-sex attraction; people whose natural inclination seems to be to lie and not tell the truth; people who "fool around" with someone they're not married to. What do we think of them? Are they, because they are that way, disqualified from God's grace? Is there a difference between us and them? There is not.

How about the person who is basically good: they've never done anything seriously wrong, like commit adultery, or steal something valuable, or some other vile thing we hear about in the news. Is there not a difference between such a person – a good, decent, respectful person – and the really profane ones I mentioned earlier? Paul, when he was still Saul, was one of those people: an outstanding citizen! Yet there came a time when he concluded (near the end of his life) that he was *the worst of sinners* (1 Tim 1:15). *What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things* (Php 3:8).

Which leaves us only with one position: to thank God that he gave us the tool to receive the righteousness of Jesus. He gave us faith! If he hadn't, we would not be saved. Don't have faith? All we need to do is ask God for it, and he gives it out generously.

There's a story about Peter that needs to be shared right now, a story of how Peter literally took a step of faith because he wanted to show that he was a follower of Jesus. Peter, and the other disciples had spent the day with Jesus: watching his every move, seeing how he would handle different situations, hearing him teach like no other, watching him as he performed the miracles and healings. A whole bunch of people had joined them, and because it was getting late Jesus sent the disciples on ahead, in a boat. The wind rose and began to push against the boat; but not only the boat: the water, too. The waves grew higher and higher, and we can imagine what it was like to climb to the top of the peak of the wave, and then run down the edge into the trough fast and furious. It was terrifying. Yet Jesus had told them to go on ahead.

Suddenly they saw someone walking toward them. They were already frightened enough, but this sent their stomachs into even bigger knots! They had heard stories of beings living in the lake, demons who did terrible things to unsuspecting travelers. Suddenly the demon was speaking to them, and just as suddenly they saw – could it be? – they heard him say that it was Jesus. *“Lord, if it's you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water”* (Matt 14:28).

Why did Peter make such a foolish request? After all, everybody knows, and Peter the fisherman would certainly have known it by experience, that people just don't. People don't walk on water. Why was Peter so insistent? Was he just being his normal, arrogant, talk-before-you-think self? Peter knew how it works. Jesus had come to him and gave the command, *“Follow me.”* When a person becomes a disciple, a follower, this is what is expected. It may seem impossible; it may seem unreasonable; it may seem to be way too much to ask. Yet it's the way that discipleship works. *“A student/disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student/disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master”* (Matt 10:24). The truth is, it's what Peter wanted. He wanted to be precisely, exactly like Jesus.