

“God’s Presence....”
John 14:15-27
Scott B. Martin – August 30, 2009

As we move towards the conclusion of our series on the Statement of Faith we come to the final section dealing with the deeds of God. Last week we looked at how God calls us as followers of Jesus to experience not only the joy of being brothers and sisters in Christ but also to experience the “cost and hardships” that this entails, costs and hardships that come about as we seek to serve others in Christ’s name, as we seek to live gospel lives and share the gospel message, as we “resist the powers of evil”, to “join Christ in his passion and victory.” Being a Christian is not for sissies or wimps, or those who crave constant self-indulgence, or those seek only prosperity and ease. The path is so arduous that none of us could make the journey on our own. Not only do we need sisters and brothers who can be companions in the pilgrim’s life, more importantly we need God! So it is the concluding section dealing with the deeds of God and how God acts in the world includes this promise: **“God promises to all who trust, forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, God’s presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in God’s kingdom which as no end.”**

I find it significant that our ancestors in the faith chose to say that all those who TRUST the promises of God will find blessing. They did not say that everyone who BELIEVES God will find blessing. True, belief in the fullest sense of the word would have worked equally well here. Belief simply means “by–life.” One visibly demonstrates what one “entrusts” one’s life to by the way one lives, the choices one makes and the actions one takes. Belief in this sense certainly would have worked here; yet for all too many people belief has come to mean a check list of “truths” one gives one’s assent to. Trust is less open to this degradation in meaning. To trust in something is to rely on it, have confidence in it, to continue to hope in the integrity, strength, ability, of someone or something to fulfill all promises.

Perhaps you all have seen the following sign behind a cash register, **“In God We Trust, all other pay cash!”** Such signs tell us that the store will not accept IOU’s; checks; or credit card payments for purchases. All purchases must be paid for with cash. The store is saying, with a sense of humor, that it does not trust all its customers’ checks

to clear, nor are they willing to risk that all their customer's credit cards are valid. Running a business, or for that matter dealing with people in any situation, might well lead one to NOT trust people. We tend to trust only those we know who have proved themselves to be trustworthy. "God promises to all who trust ... forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, God's presence in trial and rejoicing and eternal life in God's kingdom, which has no end."

The first promise our Statement of Faith lifts up in this section is "forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace." Last night I had a strange call from a complete stranger in the Carolinas. He had somehow gotten my phone number off the internet. He called to ask basically three things: 1. "was smoking a sin especially for a pastor?" 2. "Was drinking in moderation a sin? Finally "Was there such a thing as an unforgivable sin?" This last question was a reference to the scripture that says sins against the Holy Spirit are unforgivable.

Many people are concerned about sin and they should be. "Sin" is an inescapable reality in life. We dare not pretend it is not. We all make bad decisions, many of which have negative consequences not only for ourselves but others. We all do and say things we shouldn't and often wish we hadn't. These lead to a separation from God and neighbor. The Apostle Paul basically viewed sin as "missing the mark, missing the target" that God has set up. We certainly all miss the mark from time to time in our personal lives and in our dealings with God and others.

I was interested in reading about the letter that Senator Ted Kennedy sent to Pope Benedict, in which he said, "**I know I have been an imperfect human being but with the help of my faith I have tried to right my path...**" All of us remember Kennedy's bouts with drinking, his problems with philandering and the events around Chappaquiddick. You do not live to be 77 without having much to regret. Faith in God can help a person "right their path." Sin is a reality but grace is an even greater reality. So it is that as Kennedy was dying at home the Pope prayed that he would be "**sustained in faith and hope.**"

You might wonder how I responded to the telephone call. I told him that while smoking was certainly an unhealthy habit I didn't think it qualified as a sin in the usual sense of the word. On further reflection I guess you could say it was sin against one's

body which God certainly wants us to keep as healthy as possible and it might be a sin against one's family if you die early from smoking caused by cancer; but if this is the case unhealthy eating and a number of other things might qualify as a sin. I said drinking alcohol was not a sin unless one drank irresponsibly or one's drinking led to addiction. Finally, I said that while I was aware of the passage that spoke about a sin against the Holy Spirit being unforgivable that I did not believe any sin was unforgivable. Jesus didn't die on a cross to leave loop holes in God's offer of grace.

One final word on sin before moving on. All too often we focus on minor sins in our lives and overlook our part in greater systematic or societal sins. In a way this is natural, since it's the little sins that most directly affect us and those near us. Hence my callers questions about smoking and alcohol. But even staying close to home we could ask questions about such things as gossip, or lack of charity, or unkind words, or not being as loving as we should be, etc.

Moving out beyond our immediate issues we might well look at our small parts in systematic injustice and sins. The sins of holocaust, segregation, apartheid, genocide, etc. would have been greatly mitigated if people in those countries had stood up for what was right. The sins of global warming, ecological damage of all kinds, global poverty, the break down of families, gangs, economic injustice, etc. would be greatly mitigated if we all did our small parts. "God promises to all who trust forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace."

The UCC Statement of Faith recognize the broader implications of sin that I was just talking about. Among the promises highlighted is that God promises "**courage in the struggle for justice and peace.**" This promise highlights our prophetic role as Christians. There is no doubt that Jesus acted in prophetic ways. When Jesus asks people who he was many said he was a prophet, some even thought he was Elijah, come back to earth. Jesus spoke out about economic injustice and consistently looked to the needs of the poor. When Jesus ran into an angry mob about to stone a woman to death for committing adultery he stopped them saying, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." Let's be clear. Jesus was not just dealing with an individual's sin here or making a general comment about sin. He was standing up to a mob of people, to a whole community of people, who by the religious laws and customs of the time were within

their “rights” to stone this woman to death. Jesus causes them to see that the religious laws and customs they were living by were unjust and should be stopped.

If you want to get a feeling for just how prophetic and how courageous an act this was, just imagine Jesus in a fundamentalist Muslim community trying to stop a stoning today. Now imagine Jesus in Georgia in the 1940’s trying to stop the lynching of an African American. ... Imagine Jesus speaking with a Wall Street banker now in the midst of the greatest economic decline since the Great Depression, who has asked him what he needs to do to inherit eternal life and Jesus saying, “Sell all you have and give it to the poor.” This is why the UCC, as well as other churches try to mobilize their members to address such things as: the international debt of poor countries; fighting for low cost medicine for AIDS patients in poor countries; access to health care; migrant farm workers and living wage issues; civil rights, women’s rights, so forth and so on. **“God promises to all who trust... courage in the struggle for justice and peace.”**

The source of this courage in the struggle for justice and peace comes from God’s presence. In the mid-80’s I was part of a UCC mission trip to Central America. One of the places we visited was Guatemala. It was in a hotel gift shop, in the Lake Atitlan area, that I first saw a Guatemalan stole like the one I’m wearing today.

It was only later that I learned the story behind it. Father Stan Rother was a Catholic priest who served in this troubled area for many years. During his time there the indigenous Mayan Indians were being oppressed by the Guatemalan government. Many were being kidnapped, beaten, tortured and killed. Government death squads had gotten so bold as to even start killing priests and nuns, because they ministered to the poor. It got so bad at one point that Father Rother went back to the United States. He couldn’t stay he went back. He wrote at one point, **“This is one of the reasons I have for staying in the face of physical harm. The shepherd can not run at the first sign of danger. Pray for us that we may be a sign of the love of Christ for our people, that our presence among them will fortify them to endure these sufferings in preparation for the Kingdom.”**

Father Rother was not a politically radical priest. He went about offering Bible classes; catechesis; mass; visiting the poor and those who were being oppressed. One

local “supposed leader in the Church and town” complained about what he was doing saying, “Father is defending the people.” Father Rother took it as a complement.

In the middle of the night on July 28, 1981 four men broke in to the house where he was staying and shot him twice in the head. Father Rother’s body is buried back in his native Oklahoma but the family, at the request of the people of Santiago Atitlan, allowed his heart and some of his blood to be buried in the church altar. The people there view Father Rother as a saint and martyr of the church. No doubt to this day people continue to pray by this altar, remembering the life and ministry of Father Stan Rother.

Through out his ministry he would ask people to pray for him and the people he served. There is no doubt in my mind that he was able to engage in this ministry because of three things: his love for the people; their love for him; and God’s sustaining presence.

The final promise that this section of the Statement of Faith makes is “God promises to all who trust ... eternal life in the Kingdom which has no end.” This is the final and greatest gift that God gives. The promise is that not only will God be with us in this life, in the struggles of the pilgrim’s life here, but ultimately we will be with God in heaven. The Gospel of John assures us, “...the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. ... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Amen.