

FAITH AS PASSPORT

Pentecost 12 – Cycle C: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Our confirmands had a brush with faith this past week. They gathered at Edgewood Camp and Conference Centre in Eden Mills – about 20 youth in Grades 7, 8, and 9 from seven different churches. Because the numbers were small, there was a focus, a spirit, and an intimacy this year that we haven't had in other years. And I could say the same held true for the eight confirmation leaders who, according to the emails that came in yesterday, found the week to be a time of refreshment, renewal, and growth. Faith is held in community, and when the community members are few enough to know one another's name and some of their life story, there is power in the encounter. Everyone contributes and everyone benefits. It may be the same phenomenon our congregation experiences at the sunrise service on Easter Sunday, the Christmas Day service, our midweek Lenten services, and our Bible studies. As counterintuitive as it seems, less can be more.

And so, this past week at camp, we prayed and talked about prayer with our youth; we encouraged one another to ask questions – both of each other and of God; we considered how necessary it is to forgive one another if the reign of God is to come into our experience and into the experience of others; we saw some examples of God's transforming power in our midst and how seamlessly transformation is linked to love and service in Jesus' name. Not so much by design as by accident, it all came together for our youth by our last day. We'd had enough God-talk and enough sharing with each other that phrases such as "friends in Christ" and words such as "Creation, music, story, and sign" became more than words. All of these things had become truly ours in the broad landscape of faith. One of our own youth observed that she connected with everything that happened in worship at camp in a new way; everything was so clear.

For Alicia and me, as well as the staff including two of our own Christ Church youth, it was also an emotional time, because it was the last week at Edgewood for our dear friend and mentor in youth ministry, Pastor Fred Ludolph. Friday was his last-ever day as camp director; tomorrow, he and Debbie Lou will move into their Waterloo home and begin facing the challenges that await them with the congregation of St. John's, Waterloo. It is a huge leap for them – a leap of faith, really; but also a leap from country to city, from working primarily with children and youth to working primarily with seniors, from the ever-changing demands of a camp to the intransigence of an old, established congregation. Both Fred and Debbie Lou take the theology of Call very seriously; without question, they'll be praying their way through the uncertainty and strangeness of the next weeks, months, and possibly years. We, too, shall remember them in prayer, as well as the Board of Directors at Edgewood, and the congregation of St. John's, Waterloo.

Alicia and I have been with Fred almost every year of his thirteen years at the camp, seeing the power of his love of nature, his love for youth and for the church translate into one of the most significant ministries our synod has for children, teens, and young adults. Fred's gifts for ministry are broad, and Edgewood's loss will unquestionably be St. John's gain. But Alicia and I cannot help see his move to Waterloo from Eden Mills as the end of an era, a golden era in the life of our synod. Alicia doesn't know this, but there were a few times this past week at camp when I came close to losing it and one time when I actually did as I reflected again and again on how deeply we have all been blessed by Fred's leadership and mentoring. It was overwhelming for me to have all my past memories of confirmation camp upon confirmation camp meld with what was happening before my eyes as Fred preached and led worship and gave directions to the campers and counsellors. It seemed impossible to me that this was the last week of camp life as we have known it. And perhaps everyone was having the same difficulty I was.

I don't think Fred was though. Untypically, we spent several moments together during the week. He kept mentioning the things he won't miss. The things he will miss, especially this close to end, went unmentioned, but I knew he was thinking of them; mulling them over, as is his wont.

Perhaps more than anyone, Alicia has benefitted from what Pastor Fred has been able to pass on. He has been her mentor in youth ministry, all of her own gifts for ministry and music and her years of study at Emmanuel Bible College notwithstanding. Through Alicia, as well as through many of our youth, our congregation is deeply connected with this golden era that has just passed, and it will live on in and

through our ministry together and the leadership we give in the wider church. We thank God for the grace we have known and the many blessings we have received. And we thank God for Pastor Fred.

And so, this is what faith looks like. It is people learning from one another, sharing with one another, helping one another, hanging with one another, hanging in with one another – all because of our love of God, our love of Jesus and his gospel, and our love for one another. Faith is the passport that admits us to all the intangibles that give life its meaning and purpose; all those intangibles that constitute the Spirit of God finding home in us and then guiding us through the darkness of doubt and unknowing. We hope because of faith. We trust because of faith. We grow in wisdom and understanding because of faith. We both lose ourselves and find ourselves because of faith.

Twenty years ago, Alicia Becker was not the Youth Minister of Christ Lutheran Church, Waterloo; but she was in formation, having caught faith from her parents, from her pastor, her Sunday School teachers, her friends in Christ, and later Pastor Fred, and several others whose names I don't know. Faith, we observe in Alicia, and I hope in ourselves, is the passport to mission and discipleship.

And here's the thing: as long as we keep using it, it never expires!