***I believe in G-D***,

Who does nothing by accident, but by design caused grace, mercy, and goodness to call me into being. Created in me was an image and likeness to Himself, and capacity to trust and receive the love poured into my life through Christian believers, who themselves through stories, holy scripture, in love and discipline, ***trusted G-D*** ***to use them to glorify His name.***

 ***G-D continues to pour love into me***, through HIS Holy Spirit revealing Jesus, HIS love, sacrifice, sorrow, and joy. Through the holy discipline of inspired preaching, using the gifts of others in voice, song, music, art, and theology, my calling is to bring G-D’s Word to the world HE loves.

 Though this world sees brokenness, G-D sees me precious and uses me to carry the light of Christ, nurturing the Church catholic and those who sit in darkness, to see great light. ***By grace, I am called to serve…***

G-D is revealed to a world needing grace and salvation. He paid the cost of all our sinfulness. Knowing that a perfect SON would give His life to do His Father’s will, Jesus humbled himself and gave himself up for us all, to give glory to G-D, purchasing for us the chance to choose again, by grace, abundant life. In power made perfect in weakness, Jesus is leading those who choose life in HIM, to be part of HIS body, the Church, perfected-- by grace through faith; Spirit-filled servants G-D  ***called according to HIS purpose.***

We become instruments of HIS WORD; and voice love in action at the urging of the Holy Spirit as we live in the world but not of the world. In this task we build upon a foundation of saints who have gone before us, equally imperfect, yet like HIM now by grace, for they trusted G-D in their earthly life. ***To HIM all praise and glory.***

The perfection of G-D is seen in a mirror dimly as we worship, confess and are pardoned, give our spiritual gifts, celebrate beauty of space, light, shadow, color, simplicity, grace, give our talents to create churches dedicated to the glory of G-D, singing together hymns of praise both new and old. We celebrate His love in a community that spans centuries yet in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are that “great cloud of witnesses” who surround us and worship with us our Lord Jesus. We celebrate their witness and story in scripture as the Word of G-D for us, for in those chapters saints are revealed in true, unblinking honesty. ***The calling forth of a people from slavery in Egypt*** to the promised land is

the 40-year journey of growing up in faith, from “what have you done for us today G-D?” --to accepting the grace of unmerited freedom and blessing to become HIS “peculiar people” called out to be a blessing to the world. Our ancestors in faith a generation later settled this promised land flowing with milk and honey because G-D desired them to be ***a blessing to all peoples.*** The visible and invisible church began with Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, Ethiopian eunuchs, Romans soldiers, kings and peasants, widows and sellers of purple, tent-makers and women of the streets, tax collectors, foxhole believers, nurses, doctors, men, women, a girl who offer to draw water from wells for thirsty camels, a women asked for a cup of water and then given living water by the Messiah of G-D, and a boy who offered his lunch of 5 loaves and 2 small fish to help Jesus feed 5000.

***I believe in miracles, of hearing, healing, hearts broken and renewed, of life redeemed for we are precious, and our needs are known to G-D.***

Centuries later, church polity leads us to seek justice and righteousness, hallmarks of G-D in scripture. In our calling as elders, we assume an easy yoke, and a light burden, for we are called to “put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, we may be able to stand our ground, and after we have done everything, to stand”. (Eph.6:11)

The devil tempts us to leave off a piece of armor, to expose ourselves, yet think we are strong. We and those we are called to nurture are exposed then to mortal danger. An oriental curse says, “May you live in interesting times.” Just so, yet G-D is our Ruler yet. Ephesians 6:12 says, “We do not struggle against flesh and blood but against the rulers, and authorities, the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”. We are like soldiers called up to serve. We first must tend our armor, clean and test our weapons in preparation, and review battle strategy given to us by our commander. Our G-D has given us armor against sin and evil in all its guises. Each piece is essential for our protection so we can serve faithfully without fear. To study G-D’s Word, seeking in prayer to know G-D’s will, follow G-D’s Holy Spirit with courage and trust; and when we have done everything we are called to do, to stand and watch God win the battle.

When I am faithful to daily prayer, study and confession, open to new assignments, and follow G-D’s will, then it is not me who achieves, but G-D from whom all blessings flow. As we forgive those who need pardon for debts owed to us, we affirm that we are ourselves the forgiven children of G-D and heirs of HIS redeeming love. Creation, now a wasteland of human greed, hubris, pride, hate, is a field not abandoned but white for the harvest. G-D would not have any of HIS children live eternally in bondage to sin, when HIS Son has paid the price of their salvation. Scripture declares that NOTHING in all creation can separate us from the love of G-D in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to G-D!

Cheryl Duke

Journey of Faith 08-09-2024

My first distinct memories as a child are of a babysitter, Mrs. Keyser (Kysie), whose home I stayed in during the day while my brothers went to school and mom to work. She would wake me up and warm my feet by rubbing them between her palms and then quickly put on my socks and shoes and then we would do things together at her house. One day I used a word that I had heard, and she told me that was a bad word, and where did that word come from. I pointed to my tongue, and she took me out to the kitchen sink, and she dabbed the washcloth on the bar of soap and had me wash that bad word out of my mouth. I was sad to have disappointed my Kysie and cried, but then she had me rinse my mouth which still tasted funny, and then said, “what should we put in place of that bad word that you washed out? Do you think a fresh sugar cookie would be just the thing?” I nodded and so together we made sugar cookies and the taste of soap, and my sadness were indelibly overprinted with a positive experience of how discipline with kindness feels. That memory and many others wove a tapestry of goodness and kindness through my life, teaching me right from wrong. My experience of church, of grandparents, and parents, of people who welcomed me and taught me came through VBS, Bible study, a weekly stick of chewing gum after Sunday School from Mr. Brown the “gum man”—loving kindness.

 Kysie’s part in my faith journey came full circle when several years later I went back with my family to Kansas to visit and I was able to visit Kysie again. She had been so big when I was small, but now I was 12, she was 4’ 7” and I was 5’2”. I was taller than her! She was going to an evening outdoor revival meeting supported by her Baptist Church and if I wanted to come with her, we could visit and worship. I was happy to just see her, and so we agreed. My mother warned me not to do anything crazy then my parents dropped me off. Kysie drove us to the large open grassy area with chairs set up. I watched with interest as people gathered but was also feeling a little out of place. A lady dressed a little “odd” to me stood up a few rows away and began to speak, thanking God for taking such care of her, helping her through difficulties, and blessing her with this meeting tonight and a chance to be a witness. I thought to myself that this was a crazy old lady who unlike my Kysie was not so clean and well-dressed but looked a little like a bag lady. I was glad to not be sitting right next to her. Soon the service began, and I listened to the message. Suddenly I felt Jesus asking if I wanted to be part of HIS family, if I wanted to have HIS love in my life and receive HIS grace and forgiveness. And as I was saying yes in my heart, I was suddenly given a wisdom that did not come from me to see the lady I had scorned for what she really was. She was my sister, part of my family, and she had gotten up to speak perhaps lonely, perhaps awkward, but she had been faithful in being a witness and Jesus loved her and I realized I loved her too. I went forward holding Kysie’s hand because I wanted to be a part of the family of God. As a child of God, I was prayed for that night by someone I didn’t know, but I knew God had given me life. I wondered if I had done the “something crazy” Momma warned me not to do, but it didn’t matter. I knew I was a believer in Jesus. In August of that year, I joined the Presbyterian Church. Through grace, that year and following spring many opportunities came to hear Dr. Billy Graham on television and each time I would feel that sense of internal awareness that I was not living up to my promises to God. I was attending church, but that was not doing much. Each time I would recommit and over time our family grew closer to God and the church. When the new pastor came to visit, it was someone I felt I liked, and he soon became friends with my parents, and I admired him as someone I felt was real.

In some ways, I think that pastor, the Rev. Harry Horne became my early role model. His was a gentle humor, and a deep kindness, and somehow a knowing of what was needed. When I was 16, I was asked if I would teach 1st and 2nd grade Sunday School since they didn’t have enough willing adult teachers. I was glad to do it and that began two years which blessed me more than anyone. I stayed about 2 weeks ahead of my students. I got to be creative and enjoyed teaching each week the David C Cook lessons which were the stories of people in the Old and New Testament. I added crafts that were fun to plan and do, and I worked to read the stories so the 6 to 8 kids who attended would remember them. What I discovered in seminary was God had been preparing me when I was teaching the children’s Sunday School.

The first test that is given by our denomination for confirming our ability to be a pastor is Bible Content Exam. When I learned I had aced the Bible Content Exam the spring of my first year in seminary, it was a quiet ‘yes’ echo from G-D ‘yes, yes you should be here’. That quiet voice later helped me also grow up and take responsibility, admit failure and embrace life. After my first year of seminary and summer ministry work, I found myself asking for God to help me amid my angst and sadness, to find fulfillment and joy. My asking God released an answer I couldn’t deny. It was an upwelling joy that poured over me of future, of life and the Presence of the Holy that would continue to love and support and make a way for me. And I felt that life was the choice and yes, change would be painful, but healing, and it would lead me to new places and people. Most of all, I needed to own failure and learn from it. And the decision again was Yes! I want to be part of your family Jesus, for that means all my failures will become strengths if I learn from them, and finishing seminary will be my way forward, toward serving God as He chooses. And it was true. It didn’t make it easy, but it made me a better pastor. I completed a year of C.P.E. parish-based training, an in-sequence D. Min. got married, and spent 28 years sharing love and the challenges of church ministry with someone who supported my call to serve. We shared a love for media ministry, and many interests and hobbies. After my second associate, with a baby 6 months old, I returned to Richmond and discovered my call as a solo pastor and through it my calling to build up and grow ministry in the smaller church.

Later, continuing education over 8 years in a program teaching Bowen Family Systems for pastors, blessed me with greater self-awareness as a pastor, friend, parent, child, and family member and in those relationships to respond with genuine self rather than react to others out of anxiety.

My first opportunity to do that was at the coffee hour following my first Sunday as Interim Pastor, in a church whose previous woman pastor had resigned, and anger and unhappiness were felt on all sides. The elder statesman of the congregation was standing about 3 feet away from me. Joe lifted his cup of coffee, took a sip and said, “Well Pastor, you better get this right or we will never call another woman pastor.” The 70 or so members who had gathered to greet me and each other in the fellowship room ALL inhaled and you could have heard a pin drop. I felt a love for this gentleman and a thankfulness that here truth could be told. What came out of my mouth was a chuckle and “No pressure eh Joe? no pressure.” He grinned at me, we clicked our Styrofoam cups and laughed as we shared that joy in the Lord that comes when we tell the truth, and no one dies. I can tell you good came out of that 16-month ministry, particularly the healing needed in the congregation…and Bowen Family Systems and some Roberts Rules of Order judiciously filtered in. A great deal of energy that became available once the anxiety was not taking it all, allowed that church to add 22 new members, receive a gift of property and build on it a play area and outdoor picnic pavilion to serve church and community and a youth 4-H group. With all these G-D given resources, they called the pastor they wanted, and I went on to other struggles and joys. Yet I could call tomorrow and get a cheerful hello.

God has blessed me to grow, helped me make room for others to speak and be heard, and taught me to step back and think instead of reacting to anxiety being expressed. I have better relationships within my family because I remain myself, not a child or sibling but a person who loves them even if I don’t always understand what is going on in them at that moment. And love wins! Not immediately, or as fast as I might wish, but in God’s good time, love wins!

After Clif’s death, I was blessed with the love and friendship of another loving man, my husband Dick, with whom I spent 5 wonderful years. Yet God was so good, he gave me time enough to love him dearly and enjoy wonder-filled times and memories! G-D gives and takes back into Himself, and we grow stronger for having lived through the storms. HE hears our sighs too deep for words and continues to give everything we need, and more.