

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B
November 15, 2009
The Reverend Larry Beach

“Testimony”

“You’ve come a long way, Baby!” That advertising cliché is on my mind this morning as I stand here. From a shy, inward turned little boy whose mother made him walk back ½ a block and speak to a lady who had spoken to me, but I had ignored, to standing here in the pulpit of one of the largest churches in the diocese. It may not seem like much to a lot of people, but to this person it is huge. And, can you believe it? It has only taken me about 73 years to get this far!

So, today I am not going to offer a sermon. This is my first opportunity to speak with you and I wish to use this time to share some of myself with you – not my historical autobiography, but the spiritual interventions that have had significant impact on who I am right now. In other words, I would like to share with you the personal God that I know.

I grew up in the Methodist church with church going parents. That meaning – we went to church on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening and any other time the doors were open. I started singing in the choir as a junior in high school. I earned the God and Country scout award which involved work at the church. In these years I developed a real feeling of being at home in the church – a sense of awe even in the empty building. I still get that feeling when I walk into this space. When all is quiet and there is only natural light, I look around and stand in awe. This is the place where we will all gather and God will be in our midst because he is always here.

So, what happened? I went to college for six years, that’s what. During that time I only went to church sporadically. After college I took a job in Kingsport and started singing in the choir at a Methodist church. I met Faye and we started family life. That sets the stage. Now let me share those times that God has been personally gracious to me.

It was during this early time in our life together that I was arriving at a personal spiritual crisis. The form it took was, “If God is love where is he?” The preacher would talk about love and say all kinds of good things, but I did not see it. What I saw was all kinds of bad things going on – in the world, in the community and even with people I knew. The manifestation of this personal crisis was that I could not pray. I could be hypocritical with all

the outward stuff but, to me, the ultimate hypocrisy would be to talk in my own mind to something that was not there. So, I decided that I had to have an answer and I truly did not care what it was.

During this time Faye asked if I would be interested in going with her to a spiritual retreat in Gatlinburg. A spiritual retreat? You don't know how much I did not want to do something like that! I was not sure I was that desperate. But, I really was. I needed to be willing to seek my answer wherever it might be found – even there.

So, I went. God responded immediately in the lobby of the Mountain View Hotel. We had just checked in and had reached the bottom of the stairway leading up to the next level. For some reason I turned around and faced the lobby. Across the lobby was a group of people who had just come in to register. They were greeting each other with hugs and happy voices, and the love they were sharing seemed to gather itself and roll past me like soft summer breeze. It was a physical thing. I can still feel it. God was there and He not only made sure I saw Him, but felt Him as well.

The retreat had not even started. But, I had had my retreat. God had responded to my sincere desire to know the answer whatever it might be. He did not waste any time giving it to me either.

I used to be a smoker. I started in college and was thoroughly addicted by the time I took a job in Kingsport. I would smoke anything that burned (tobacco only) being somewhat partial to a pipe.

I had tried several times to quit. It would last a few weeks or even a month or two but I would always find myself back at it again.

I remember well the time we were driving along this country road. I do not remember where we were. I was smoking a cigar, windows down, of course. The cigar did not taste very good. Nothing to smoke did much anymore – and food did not have much taste at all.

I am holding the thing between my fingers and start thinking. I need to quit. I really want to quit, but I cannot. I ask God to please help me. (We are on speaking terms now.) God, please help me to quit. I cannot do this myself. At that point I turned the whole matter over to God. I flipped the cigar out of the window and did not think any more about it. Not until two or three meals and several good smoke times had come and gone did I realize that I had not smoked and actually had not had a desire to do so. That was

about 40 years ago and still to this day I have no desire to smoke what so ever.

God heard my plea and answered me. Why was he so gracious to me? I do not know. I know that I am extremely thankful.

This being a Trinitarian church I suppose there must be three. This is the really spooky one. Somehow I had gotten hung up on the last verse of Chapter 5 in Matthew. This states, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." If you understand perfection, and my lack of it, as I do, you might sympathize with having a problem here.

Let me set the scene. I was working in the International side of my employer's business. While I did not travel a great deal, when I did it was overseas. This particular trip was to Europe. We had a sales office in Zug, Switzerland and I happened to be there over the weekend. On this particular day I was on my own until that afternoon. After having breakfast and taking a walk I returned to my room and lay down. It was then that I returned to pondering this perfection thing. The more I pondered the more agitated I became. I finally reached such a state that I rolled off the edge of the bed and knelt in prayer begging God to show me how I can be perfect when I know that I cannot.

After a bit, I just got quiet. I knelt there and let all my thoughts die away, possibly to the most complete restfulness my waking brain has ever experienced. I just knelt there. I did not know what to expect. Actually, I don't recall expecting anything.

All of a sudden, through my head streamed this ticker tape. That is exactly what it looked like – an old style Western Union ticker tape. For you who are too young to know what that is, a moving digital sign will serve the purpose. The words on it were simply "Hebrews 10:14."

You need to understand. I need three hands to dial a telephone number, one to keep a finger on the number, one to hold the phone and another to dial the number. That's how long I am able to remember a number.

So I rushed to my suitcase and got my bible.. (That tells you something right there.) Also, the ticker tape had passed into oblivion by then. In a panic, I found Hebrews and – Oh! Was it 10-14 or 14-10? God is good! Hebrews only has 13 chapters. I quickly looked up 10-14.

Now, the bible I had with me is the one I am holding. It is "The Living Bible" which is a paraphrase. No authorized version here –interesting. Here is what I read, "For by that one offering he has made forever perfect in the sight of God all those whom he is making

holy”. It absolutely blew my mind and still does. Could any answer have been more clear? And, a spooky thing is that most translations don’t read this way. Rather than, “those whom he is making holy,” most read more like today’s lectionary lesson from the NRSV which states, “those who are sanctified,” like it is an accomplished fact. I know better and that was the problem.

Now I know. Although I am a work in progress and though I can see no way how I will get there, God sees the finished product. He sees perfection even though I cannot even imagine it. I just have to trust that He knows what He is doing.

Here I stand after 73 years of life and can share with you the few things that I absolutely know.

God is Love. Whenever someone shows love to another person, to an animal, or to God’s creation around them they have God written all over them – and I can see Him.

Whenever you give something to God – completely and unconditionally – He will honor the gift even if it is an undesirable thing, like smoking.

Even though I am a greater sinner than anyone but me is ever likely to know, God sees the finished product. I am on a journey and everyone here who wants to be is also on the same journey.

What have I done to deserve such a God? Absolutely nothing! It is by His grace that I know His love. It is by His grace that I am healed of nicotine addiction. It is by His grace that so many wonderful people have come into my life and helped me on my journey – and still you come. It is by His grace that I stand here today – a sinner who is perfect in his sight.

It still blows my mind! Is it any wonder why, at the Dismissal, I absolutely must add, “ALLELUIA, ALLEUIA!!”