

Growing Faith

A little more than a decade ago Charlie offered to take me for a ride in his airplane. Charlie was in his early 80s, and he had built the airplane himself after selling a couple of others he had also built. In other words, he knew what he was doing, and because of his years of flying, he was an experienced and confident pilot. When Charlie offered to take me on a half hour flight to another town (2 hours by car), I took him up on his offer.

The plane was small, a two-seater, one behind the other. I sat in the back seat, my legs on either side of Charlie's seat which was in front of me. There was a joystick that was uncomfortably close to my belly, and the canopy that covered us was made of thin plexiglass. The wings seemed to be little longer than my arms, and I guessed the steel body was less than a millimetre thick. As we took off, we were not more than 10 feet into the air, and I realized I was in trouble. As we quickly climbed, my fear of heights began to manifest itself. By the time we had reached 2000 feet, the maximum there because of proximity to the Toronto airport, I was terrified. Charlie, sensing my fear, asked me three times over if I wanted to return, and three times I refused. However, when he asked the fourth time, I could not refuse, and knowing that if I got out of the airplane at our destination, I would never get back in. We returned, and we landed about 15 minutes later.

Charlie invited me to the small airport lounge for a cup of coffee, and we discussed why I had become so afraid. He had experienced this before, and he told me that it was because I had to put my life in the hands of another. I assured him that I thought he had done a good job building the plane and I found him to be a competent pilot, but it was still difficult for me to put my life in his hands and my body in his plane. My fear of heights was the real problem, and as competent as he and the airplane were, my fear could not be overcome by trust.

This past Sunday in the catechism class, we talked about growing in our faith, and I used this illustration to talk about what faith is. Faith is putting our lives into the hands of another. It is one thing to say that we believe, it is often another thing to put what we believe into practice. There is a song that contains these words, "Faith begins by letting go, giving up what had seemed sure, taking risks and pressing on, though the way feels less secure: pilgrimage both right and odd, trusting all our life to God." When we put our faith in God, we also are making the commitment to follow him where he leads and to live in a way that pleases him. This kind of lifestyle might feel odd, and following Jesus may take us places where we would not go if we relied on ourselves. Living faithfully, in fact, can be a little bit scary.

While our ability to believe in Jesus Christ is a gift of the Holy Spirit, we also have a responsibility to cause our faith to grow, and there are several methods we can use to do exactly that. The first would be to know who God is and understand what he has done. I am fully convinced that the first cause of little faith is a lack of understanding of who God is. The best way to know God, of course, is to turn to his revelation of himself and listen again to the stories of what he has done and hear again the promises he made to us. I would never have gotten into the airplane if I didn't trust Charlie. (I did ask around to see what others

thought, and they gave good reports.) In the same way, we are not going to trust God if we don't really know who God is or what he can do. Thus, if we feel our faith is weak, a good starting point might be to discover again who God is.

But when we have done that, we also need to practice our faith. I could probably overcome my fear of flying in little planes (big ones don't bother me) if I would do it more often. It is one thing to say that I believe that an airplane and its pilot are qualified to take my high off the ground, but it is another thing to feel confident. Head knowledge is great, but experience makes head knowledge real. If we want our faith to grow, we need to step out in faith. The song that I just mentioned tells us that we need to live as God called us to live, caring for others, often sacrificing ourselves to do God's work so that we can learn experientially that God is faithful. I am sure that I am not alone when I say that I know a lot about God from the Bible but I don't always live as if what I know is true. When called by God to live selflessly, to perhaps give up the sure and tested way, we find that difficult, so difficult that we may well ignore God's calling on our lives. Saying we are Christians and living the Christian life may become two different things for us, and, of course, that is not at all what God expects from us.

Faith in God means that we put our lives in his hands, and we make ourselves willing to do and be whatever it is that he asks. Is that a frightening prospect? Yes, it is. But, again, this becomes more and more possible if we have been learning about who God is, what he has done for us, and what he promises to do. If we can trust that God is faithful, we are far more likely to be able to step out in faith. We might think of growing in faith as an upward spiral in which, as we learn more about God, we intentionally put our lives in his hands, and, as we do, we experience that he is faithful. As we experience his faithfulness, we come to know him more, and as we know him more, our faith grows. Our faith should never stop growing, and it never will stop growing as we put our lives into God's hands, trusting that he will be faithful to who he is and what he has promised.

Pastor Gary