

Life is full of preparations for what comes next. Every moment has the potential to offer guidance for what comes next. The need never ends and hopefully growth always continues. This is the time of year we celebrate graduations, but these moments celebrate what has led to that moment but what comes next is the real issue. Anyone seeing graduation as the end, doesn't understand it is part of a process that never ends.

Our faith journey is quite similar to our social and educational development. Too many see Baptism, Sunday School, Confirmation, or adult classes as something to endure and then be done with. But what comes next is what is always more important than what has been brought us to each celebration. Faith is a growing process that continues to add new courses, experiences, and opportunities. It is never something in which we can look back and say, "*Finally*" *I am done, I have the answers I need. I can rest on my laurels. Hand me a diploma!*

Early in my ministry I headed to a crisis in the home of one of the families of our congregation. A marriage was in limbo. A husband had been unfaithful, and the wife was informed she was no longer loved. She asked if I would come and talk to both and help them figure out what might come next. (So, six months into ministry and 18 months into my marriage, I was some sort of expert???)

I had never dealt with such a situation. I wasn't even sure what to expect. In the car, on the way, I kept praying out loud for some sort of wisdom and guidance. (*I also prayed not to say something stupid or make things worse.*) Gradually a plan came into being and I felt comfortable and ready to enter the fray. An hour later, as I was leaving the house I was completely frustrated because I was certain *I hadn't made a difference!* I had seen no love or openness and a marriage was ending. I was certain I had failed!

Heading home, I was jolted out of my guilt and frustration. Like lightning out of a clear sky I was jarred by the realization that a seminary diploma didn't make me an expert, but only shared tools for use in the next phase of my faith development. I had been so busy with MY plan, MY words, MY faith, I hadn't allowed for God's guidance and gifts. I realized that it was not my job to save a marriage, but simply to be whatever agent of healing and love and support that I could.

Paul talked in Romans about celebrating suffering as it leads to endurance, character and hope. At first blush, that might sound like pop-psychology or contemporary spirituality but in reality, it celebrates the gifts of God that go beyond anything the world can comprehend. When life is perfect, we too easily become complacent and assume we are getting what we deserve. When life is difficult and we are at a loss, we are reminded that God has plans and gifts that we easily forget.

Today we celebrate the mysterious ways that God is present in our lives with his presence, power, grace and guidance. We celebrate not a hidden divine entity, but

the Creator of all whose love is so great He took on a human shape, like a faithful Son, and continues to fill our beating hearts with his divine and loving Spirit. Faith is the gift which allows us to accept the gifts are shared, grow into them, and open them for use in in every tomorrow.

Rejoicing in suffering is like saying, "it is time to hit the books again!" We are never graduates but always growing. Never perfectly competent, but always forgiven and capable of growing in faith, hope, and love. We understand this truth through the example of any graduate, who quickly learns they can rely only on the tools and experiences gathered to this point. And so we keep worshipping, praying, studying, keeping eyes open for the Spirit's gifts in daily living, and accepting God's gifts of grace. We are on a journey and hopefully keep growing along the way!

For those who struggle in their relationship with God and often feel like they are losing it, remember that is that God has initiated brought the relationship with us. He will never lose us, and will keep loving, forgiving and nurturing despite any weakness or struggle.

Jesus kept telling the same thing to his disciples, who thought they had the inside track. He reminded them there was always more to share, they simply weren't ready for all of it at once. They assumed after three years with him they were ready to graduate, while he kept reminding them that faith isn't wrapped in a diploma but is a process that keeps adding pieces and power to life.

I took Drivers Ed when it was still offered in school. When I had finished the bookwork with straight "A's," I was confident I knew everything about driving and was ready to hit the road. In my arrogance at having graduated with all the facts, the first time out I almost got four of us killed. I looked left at a hill and saw nothing coming, looked right and saw nothing coming, and turned left onto the road. Failing to look a second time I missed a truck coming over the hill! Luckily the instructor had his own brake pedal and kept us from moving into the path of an oncoming eighteen-wheeler.

In similar fashion, too often we live life as if we have graduated from God. We assume we have all the answers, we are busy with living, and instead of being filled with God we spend more time being filled with ME. Suffering is a pain, but sometimes is the best lesson of all, as like an extra brake in a car, it can stop us and open our eyes!

Paul reminds that faith is a process. There is more than my wisdom, my strengths, or my weaknesses. Faith is the gift that allows God to change each moment with his presence. At our baccalaureate services our graduates wear their confirmation stoles as a reminder that God's breath carries us to each new stage with gifts of creation and forgiveness. When we remember that faith is a process, we do better at letting God lead us rather than thinking we can lead God!

When Roxanne had her back surgery, and they took her into the operating room, I was so tense and worried I was tempted to cry. Finally, I had to admit I needed help. My prayer to God was simply, "God why do I fight you so hard? Help me to let go and trust you." And he did! I can't give you the exact steps or draw a picture of how that

worked, but I learned again that faith is a process and when I allow God to lead, it is much easier to follow.

Like my fruitless counseling session, we too often feel we have graduated. The result is that marriages flounder, families fight, and congregations can stagnate. As we resist a graduate mentality and daily prepare for new lessons, visions, and ministry, we are more able to receive the gifts God already has in front of us.

In other words, remember to keep your eyes open and let God lead! Amen.