A hesitant driver, waiting for a traffic jam to clear, came to a stop on the expressway ramp. The traffic thinned, but the timid driver still waited. Finally, an infuriated voice came from behind shouting: “The sign says Yield, not give up.”

Jesus tell the parable of the unjust judge and the widow who was faithful and persistent, who did not give up in seeking justice, and finally her faith was rewarded. The letter to Timothy also tells us to be persistent and to keep the faith, to hold fast to its truths through thick and thin.

“Keep the faith.” It is a great saying. It looks good on T-shirts and bumper stickers. It is easy to say to ourselves and others: “Keep the faith.” But it is not always so easy to do. I have had times in my life which were difficult. Times that tried may patience and my faith in God. I never doubted that God existed but I wondered where He was. I wondered why He didn’t act or answer my prayer about whatever it was I was asking for. In some of those times, I was tempted to say “Why be faithful to God if He’s not being faithful to me?” That little voice in my head said, “Don’t give up now. Hang in there.” I did.

I have not faced that much discouragement but a few times in my life but I will confess that it is very hard to remain faithful at those times. You’re probably thinking, well that is not very helpful. If the minister, the person who is meant to exemplify faith, who is the public persona of faith, who gives his life in service to God and the church has trouble keeping the faith, how is he going to preach about it? Well, you may be right to be concerned, but I actually think the key to my ability to offer some wisdom on this subject is exactly in the fact that I have struggled with it.

I’ll be a little off topic for a moment. First and foremost, the church is in a whole lot of trouble if there is great chasm between the standards we have for our leaders and the standards we have for Christians in general. We are all called to be followers of Christ. We are all called to lead exemplary lives that point to the remarkable life-giving, saving witness of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And — and this is a very important and — we all fall short. No matter who we are, no matter what leadership position we are in or not in, we all fall short. We are human beings. We are fallible. We make mistakes. We hurt those we love and we struggle with our faith. The question is not whether or not we fall short — the question is whether or not we keep striving to be more Christlike in our lives, especially after we fall short. When we do fall short, do we just give up or do we make amends with God and others? Will we be humble enough to accept the grace of God when it is offered to us and then press on in our life of faith?

Having said that, how does one “keep the faith” in those difficult times or at any time? I don’t think that there is a simple or easy answer to that question, but I will say one thing about it.

I think an essential truth about how we keep the faith is this. There is a key word we often leave out of the saying “Keep the Faith.” We forget to add “together.” That is the thing about keeping the faith, we will do it best together. In those times of difficulty, I was encouraged and strengthened by the body of Christ even though the folks doing the encouraging didn’t know it. You see, God WAS there in ways I wasn’t always seeing. When we try to go it alone, we can fail. We can get lost in our own pain and sadness, our own doubts and challenges. We need community. We need each other. We need the Body of believers surrounding us. It can be so difficult to keep the faith on our own.

I think that is one of the main purposes of Christian community — we hold the faith for each other. The Christian community does many other noble and important things: we educate each other, we share in fellowship, we do good works in community, we worship, and we celebrate together. And one other important thing we do is to hold the faith for each other because that is what keeps us going when we are struggling. And Lord knows, we will all encounter struggles in the courses of our lives. We will lose friends and loved ones. We will lose jobs and dreams will be shattered. We will be traumatized by the violence in our community and the world. We will feel discouraged by the enormity of problems in the world around us. We will question God. There will be days when we will wonder if any of this faith stuff matters. We will wonder if \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Those are the days when we need each other, when we need community to surround us.

Because the journey from doubt and struggle to faith and hope often begins with believing in one other. It begins with considering that the person in the pew next to us has hope — that they believe in the possibility of resurrection and new life, even when we feel surrounded by death and loss. It means trusting in the faith of our family, our friends, our community, most especially our community of faith. It means gathering at this table, together, even when our personal landscape feels rocky and uncertain. It means coming forward to receive the love and grace of God embodied in a wafer and a sip of wine. It means being held up in and by community and knowing somewhere deep inside that we are all held up and all held together by the grace of God.

This is why it matters that we gather together for worship, and fellowship as well. We can and should pray in our own time by ourselves in the quiet moments and in solitude, but we need community. We need each other. We need to come together for the tangible reminders — in the people gathered, in the prayers we say, in the words from scripture and in the sacraments we receive — the tangible reminders that we are beloved children of God and that together we can keep the faith.

So, it is no easy or small thing to “keep the faith,” but we can do it. We can do it by reading our Bible, so that we learn and remember the stories of how much God loves us and how our brothers and sisters in faith have struggled just as we do. As 2 Timothy says, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

We can keep the faith — together. We can keep the faith by showing up, by gathering together in community to worship God. We need to show up so that we can be held up when we are struggling, and we need to show up so that we can hold others up when we feel confident in our faith. We show up because being in community is an essential part of what it means to be a Christian. I encourage you to keep showing up, because you may never know how your presence might make all the difference in the life of fellow Christian. It just might be that your showing up today has helped someone start on that journey from doubt to faith. Keep showing up. It matters. It matters in ways you may never know. Amen.