

Rethinking Faith

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

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When Pastor Tim asked me a few weeks ago if I would preach today, I was honored and, at the same time, completely terrified. Not because you're such a scary group of people, but because I knew that before I could get up here and stand at this pulpit, I'd have to face something that I've been avoiding for a long time.

I've been struggling with faith, questioning my belief in God and what it means to be a member of a Christian church. Most days, I don't sense the presence of God in my life. My prayers, if I say them, often feel empty. The words of the Bible seem remote.

I don't feel the way I think I'm supposed to feel spiritually. I've always imagined my faith journey as having a destination, or at least milestones along the way to indicate that I'm making progress. I imagined that at some point I would feel a kind of exaltation, a certainty that God is there working in my life. In the absence of this, I've wondered if I'm just missing something inside that allows me to connect with the divine. If you asked me, on a bad day, about my faith, I'd probably say "what faith?"

On the other hand, there are times when I do feel something. Last June when my mom passed away, my dad happened to be visiting me, on his way home from a trip to Hawaii. I've lived alone for a long time and at that point had dealt with a variety of medical emergencies involving my mom on my own. No big deal. But my dad was with me when I got the call that morning that my mom had been taken to the hospital. He was there with me at the hospital to support me when I learned that she had died.

On top of that, as we were leaving the hospital a while later, there getting out of her car by the entrance was Susan Watts. She hugged me and through her I felt the love and comfort of the St. Paul's family at the time when I needed it the most. What are the odds that my dad would happen to be visiting that particular Saturday, that Susan would be in that particular place at that particular moment? It was one of the most difficult days of my life, but I love that memory of feeling like I was being cared for by something beyond my comprehension. I'm profoundly grateful for that and it's something I hang onto when I feel my spiritual questioning start to harden into cynicism.

Even on an ordinary Sunday here at St. Paul's I feel a sense of comfort on a very basic level. This is what keeps me coming back, even though I may not feel a strong connection to scripture and I may not even feel capable of uttering a prayer.

In the Bible reading today we heard stories of amazing things that happened as a result of people's unwavering belief in God. These stories are meant to inspire but I also find them intimidating. That certainty of purpose in God is something I admit I can't really relate to in my daily life. If God demands that kind of rock-solid faith, and unquestioning belief of his followers, then I'm left to wonder where that leaves me right now.

Pastor Tim's sermon last week was inspiring and it shed some light on the nuances of faith. He quoted Thomas Merton and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the subject of following God even without being able to see the path ahead. In my own recent research on faith struggles, I encountered another example that I wanted to share with you today.

Mother Teresa heard the call to serve God as a young woman and, according to her letters, she felt very close to God, to the point of hearing the voice of Jesus urging her on to leave the convent where she was comfortable and go to live and work among the poor in the slums of Calcutta. But even as she started this work, she suffered a spiritual crisis that would last the rest of her life. She no longer felt the strong presence of God that had been her guide. In this prayer written to God and sent to her spiritual advisor in 1959 she describes this feeling:

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The child of your love and now become as the most hated one, the one You have thrown away as unwanted, unloved... The darkness is so dark and I am alone. The loneliness of the heart the wants love is unbearable. Where is my faith? Even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. I have no faith,. I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd in my heart and make me suffer untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me. I am afraid to uncover them because of the blasphemy. If there be God, please forgive me... I am told God loves me and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

This darkness was agonizing for her, but she continued to do the incredibly difficult work that she had been called to do and she maintained a relationship with God as the central, defining feature of her life even though she felt that God has cast her away.

Though these feelings never really went away, she eventually came to accept her "darkness" as a gift from God, a way of participating in Christ's agony on the cross and a way of sharing in the desolation and sense of abandonment experienced by the people she served. In 1961 she wrote in a letter to her spiritual advisor:

I have come to love the darkness. For I believe now that it is a part, a very small part, of Jesus' darkness and pain on earth.

And, from another letter, written a year later:

If I ever become a saint, I will surely be one of "darkness." I will continually be absent from heaven to light the light of those in darkness on earth.

Learning about the way Mother Teresa came to accept her separation from God was a powerful reminder to me that our experience of God may not be what we want or expect it to be, no matter how painful and confounding it is to us. It may be silence when we want answers, or a simple feeling of being cared for instead of a flash of enlightenment. Just because we don't feel God, doesn't mean that he or she or it isn't there with us, working through us. Mother Teresa may not have felt the light of God in her, but, by the accounts of those who knew her, she was a conduit for that light every day of her life.

And reading these letters has helped me in the process of rethinking the nature of faith in general. Mother Teresa says herself at one point that she has no faith, but I respectfully disagree. What else can you call the kind of gritty perseverance that she demonstrated in both her work and in her relationship with God, but an incredible, enduring act of faith? This version of faith doesn't have the glamour of exaltation or the comfort of certainty, but it gets things done.

So I'm beginning to understand faith not as an elusive magical thing, but as a way of living and being in the world. Faith is practicing compassion. It's keeping an open heart to God. I'm learning to think about the spiritual darkness in myself not as a source of shame or despair, but as a source of potential, not as a cold void but as a kind of stillness, a place of listening and watching, of being ready for whatever may come. Amen.