



Richmond Hill Reflections

“The Nature of ‘Faith’” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

August 16, 2020, Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Matthew 15:21-28; “FaceTime” by Clinton Smith III

As I shared last week, it’s my intention these next few weeks to pick some church words and give them another look. We hear Jesus use today’s word near the end of our gospel reading - “faith”.

“Faith” is a challenging word in contemporary usage. When we hear it, religion is often front of mind. It’s used as a synonym – Kamala Harris is not just Christian; she follows the Hindu faith. Or as Marcus Borg notes in *Speaking Christian*, we often speak of “needing faith” when it comes to religious tenets we have trouble “believing”. In this way faith and belief are seen as two sides of one coin, both requiring that we check our brains whenever we enter a place of worship, be it in person or virtually as we’re doing now. We may struggle with Easter and resurrection, assuming that we need to have “faith” that the tomb was empty, or when it came to last week’s reading, we may feel that despite what we learned in physics we need to “believe” Jesus walked on water.

But is this what Jesus meant when he told the woman from Tyre that she had great faith? Did he mean she’d suspended her reason in order to believe? Or was he speaking about her willingness to push him, trusting he’ll do the right thing, and trusting that God will do what her daughter needs? Faith is about relationship. We understand this if we shift from speaking about religion. Consider your most significant relationships. When I use “faith” in regard to Glen, I mean I have faith in him, can count on his caring and support. I know things about him, but our relationship doesn’t falter if I can’t recall the sequence of where he lived and when. He appreciates that I remember he lived in Stephenville before his dad was transferred to Labrador City. I remember details not because they are important but because he is important. As Protestants we say we’re “saved” by faith, but your heart isn’t changed by a set of beliefs. John Wesley tried to make an assent of his mind but was still losing faith. Then one night as he preached on faith he felt his “heart strangely warmed”. His life was transformed not by beliefs but an experience of the Holy Spirit.

One of the gifts of relationships is that they’re dynamic, in them we grow and change. Over 19 years with Glen, how I see myself has changed. He’s challenged me and I’ve done the same. I feel I’m a better, more rounded person because of him. My thoughts about him have changed too. I know him at a deeper level. I had early assumptions that needed to shift. This is true of “faith” relationships. Over time who Jesus is to me, who God is to me, has shifted, grown. We see this dynamic in the exchange between Jesus and the woman. His rejecting her is shocking, but she pushes back. This reminds me how important it is to push back on what I’ve been taught. Debate is a healthy part of spiritual growth. This hasn’t always been the case in the Christian church. Thankfully, we have a model in Judaism. Rabbis pushed back on each other’s interpretations of Torah. In the process their

understanding of who God is, and what God asks of us, grew. I asked Mike Seidman about this and he put it this way: “Inquiry and debate are to intentionally force us to think, to wonder, to learn, and to grow. If you truly take the whole of rabbinic writings, they literally do argue with each other to prove that there are different points of view, and we are forced to make our own synthesis... The premise as I have come to know it is that it is literally impossible to define God, faith, eternity, etc. But, by asking the questions themselves, we become closer.” I love that. I grow closer to that which I call God by wrestling with my understanding of the same one I call God. I live out the importance of my relationship with God by struggling with that relationship.

And this reminds me that it is not my relationship alone. It is something that I share with others, with other humans, and more than that with other creatures, the Earth, the entire universe. As I have wrestled with who or what God is, I’ve come to believe I am not so much in a relationship with God, but God is the relationship itself, the connection between all of us, binding us in love, drawing us together as family. This is what moved me in “FaceTime”. Smith captures a moment of connection with his wife and daughter, across space and time, as they dance not just in that moment but the future too. They’re one with each other. That is how I experience God – a sacred connection of love and life, holding us together, in everyone, and everything, calling us to grow.

I hear that connection when Borg points out that “believe” comes from the Old English *be loef*, “to hold dear”. Faith is holding God dear, holding Jesus dear, holding each other dear too. In an old episode of “The Goldbergs” I saw recently, Beverly was convinced her neighbours did “family” better than them because they celebrated a lavish Christmas compared to their Hanukkah. So Beverly cooked up “Super Hanukkah” (which looked a lot like Christmas) until her dad reminded her that she was missing a big part of being a family – celebrating where you come from. This too is what I mean by “faith”. As shared, faith connects us, affirming that we are more together than can be apart. This is why “creeds” are often a part of worship. It has become our practice to recite a variety of creeds each Easter Season, as well as for baptisms and confirmations. Many of us struggle with saying creeds, assuming a need to profess every line literally, to accept what is in it on “faith”. But we recite them as a form of connection. *Credo*, Borg writes, means “I give my heart to”. When I say “we believe” I give my heart to God, to Jesus, to my forebears and to future generations as well.

That awareness of “giving my heart” is more than a feeling. It calls me to action. Which is why I appreciate “A New Creed”. Our UCC creed names belief in God, Jesus, Spirit. It affirms faith as trusting in God, but then names faith in terms of church. If faith is being connected to each other, we need to reach out in service and a call to justice. This calls me to affirm what I shared last week. To have faith is to trust not just in sacred presence connecting us together, but to trust in what it means to be connected, be part of God’s reign. This too is where I grow, where my biases and assumptions are challenged, and viewpoints changed. In the dialogue between Jesus and the Tyrean woman we hear how faith, lived in relationship, changes how he sees her, and treats her. If Jesus can be moved to change, how much more do I need to grow in how I treat others too.

That’s how I understand “faith” (thanks Marcus) - not as what I affirm in my head or feel in my heart, but as my relationship with God, in Jesus, lived out in all that I do. What is “faith” for you?