

## THE DYNAMICS OF FAITH

Psalm 139:1-18  
Luke 15: 1-10

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June 15, 2008

According to Mark, our earliest gospel, Jesus begins his ministry preaching this message: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1.15) Focus today on the word “believe” and note that Jesus’ word includes an invitation to belief. The theme is found in the other gospels and in Paul.

My only point for now is that Christianity has to do with believing or with faith... which amounts to the same thing. We may agree with Marcus Borg who contends that Christianity should be understood more as a way of life than as a string of beliefs. But a way of life flows from fundamental convictions about what is real and true, that is from beliefs or faith of some kind.

Now faith or believing is an issue for many of us. Perhaps all of us. What to believe? How to believe? What do we mean by it? We had an adult church school class this past semester called “Rethinking Basic Beliefs” and we left many questions unsettled. A little story about Reinhold Niebuhr illustrates a state of mind common to many of us. One Sunday morning Neibuhr preached in a little chapel near his then summer home of Heath, Massachusetts. His friend and neighbor, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter stopped on the way out to shake hands. “I like what you said, Reinie, and I speak as a believing unbeliever.” Niebuhr answered: “I’m glad you did. For I spoke as an unbelieving believer.” Here we have America’s most brilliant Christian thinker and writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most compelling advocate and interpreter of the Christian faith in my lifetime, describing himself as an “unbelieving believer!” Probably many of us can identify with that. We believe but we pray with the distressed father in Mark who cried to Jesus; “I believe; help my unbelief!” Or we may identify more with Frankfurter’s position as a believing unbeliever – presumably one who stands outside the circle of faith but who feels some affinity and who wonders. Or, we may commute back and forth between the two positions.

In any case I want us to reflect today on what it means to say “We believe” or “I believe” in the context of Christian faith. I will call upon three images to guide us. No image or group of images gives the full picture but each will help grab a piece of the whole.

First, to believe means to wager. It means to bet your life on something or someone. It means to invest your whole being in a cause which could be false but which you can see as a hopeful possibility. This image was used and developed by Blaise Pascal, 17<sup>th</sup> century French intellectual. He was a brilliant mathematician, philosopher, physicist, inventor...but also a mystic, and religious thinker who also emphasized that the deepest knowledge of God comes not from calculating reason but from the heart. He gave us the familiar saying, “The heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing.” Pascal’s faith-as-wager idea seems in a different mode, but it goes something like this: If I cast my lot with the Christian affirmations and they show themselves to be true, then I have gained everything – authentic and meaningful life. If I cast my lot with the gospel and it turns out not to be valid, then I will have lost. There is that chance. However, if out of the suspicion that the gospel is not true, I do not risk the commitment, then I am sure to lose, whatever the truth may be. If it is not true, life has no meaning anyway as Pascal saw it. All is vanity. All things are full of weariness. (Ecclesiastes) A tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing. (Shakespeare, “Macbeth”)

Strictly speaking I doubt if anyone ever arrives at faith through this kind of calculating gamble. But there is something to the idea. What if you are not sure but you suspect that Christ just may represent the truth about God and about human existence, why not bet on that. Consider what might be lost if faith is mistaken. But consider also what you might lose by not taking the risk. Consider what might be lost if you sit on the sidelines in a perpetual state of non-commitment or if you simply commit to first one and then another of the popular gods of our culture: success, money, nation, family, prominence, etc.

I confess that faith as a kind of bet is the best I can do sometimes. When the idea of God seems like a product of wishful thinking, a whistling in the dark, or when life seems to have no real purpose other than one we can cook up... I might fall back on the idea of faith as a wager. What if it isn't true? What better thing to do than to try to live as if it were? There was a point in my life, years ago, when I explained my commitment to the Christian movement in these terms: "There is much in it that I cannot understand or accept. But it comes closer than anything else I know to representing those few things which seem to me certain and worthwhile." I was attracted by the Jesus of Matthew 25 who called followers to attend to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. That was about all there was to my faith. It was pretty puny, pretty pale. Only barely the size of a mustard seed. But on the basis of that much faith I got on the ship, not sure where the ship would take me or whether it would stay afloat. In time I learned to trust the ship and to feel that it was going somewhere, and I came to a much fuller and richer understanding of what it was all about. For me the wager paid off. God can do something with a fraction of a mustard seed of faith.

Of course we have to wager in many critical areas of our lives. When we decide upon a life partner, chose a vocation, devote ourselves to a cause, we often have to leap without knowing and find confirmation along the way. In faith as in other things we often have to dare in order to know.

Faith is a wager. But if it gathers much strength it becomes more. It becomes a matter of basic trust. Here is a better image, really, and one more central to the Bible and the Christian tradition.

We talked about this a lot in our class on basic beliefs. And I would like to stress now as I did then that believing is more like trusting than it is like subscribing to propositions – to statements of belief..to doctrines or creeds. Statements about God or Christ have their necessary place. But loving trust in God or in Christ are the primary matter. The trust image helps us see that believing is not only or mainly a movement of the head. It is a movement of the heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Sometimes people say that it does not matter what a person believes but only what he/she does. Action is more important than beliefs. This would be quite correct if believing were mainly a matter of thinking. Or of assenting to certain religious statements. But what if believing is a matter of basic trust? That is more fundamental. Your actions, attitudes, perspectives will flow from there. Martin Luther once said: "That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is really your god." Faith is more than an opinion. It is clinging with trust. Faith in God is not believing that some kind of supernatural being exists out there somewhere. It means trust in the Power behind all the powers that envelop your life. It means trusting that you are forgiven, accepted, affirmed, loved and liberated in the depths of your being.

Marcus Borg, drawing on Soren Kierkegaard, is very helpful in discussing faith as trust: "Faith as trust is like floating in a deep ocean...If you struggle,if you tense up and thrash about, you will eventually sink. But if you relax and trust, you will float. It's like Matthew's story of Peter walking on the water with Jesus – when he began to be afraid, he began to sink." Borg then tells about a discussion in his wife's Sunday school class about teaching children to swim. When asked to describe the experience they all said that their biggest problem was getting the child to relax in the water. Their consistent refrain was, "Its okay, just relax. You'll float, it's okay." Borg concludes: "Faith as trust is trusting in the buoyancy of God. Faith is trusting in the sea of being in which we live and move and have our being." (The Heart of Christianity)

One other implication on faith as trust. This from theologian Douglas John Hall. Faith is not the same thing as certitude. Certitude is the attitude which says: We have the Truth! We possess the Truth! We are firmly and surely aligned with the Truth and are instruments of the Truth! Human beings in our time especially are eager for certitude to protect us from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, from uncertainty, insecurity, and vulnerability. Such certitude leads us into fanaticisms, dogmatisms, imperialisms, fundamentalisms and evils of all sorts. Some might seek to combat all of this with cynicism or thoroughgoing iconoclasm. Hall sees an antidote in Biblical faith understood as trust: "God offers us an alternative to certitude. It is called trust. God

reveals Godself as one who may be trusted. Sight, or the kind of finality that sight seems to make possible, is not given. But faith is possible. This is behind Paul's recurring distinction between faith and sight. God does not give us the Truth, yet God lets the Truth live among us, incarnate – lets us glimpse enough of God's living Truth that we may learn the courage to live despite our real vulnerability, impermanence, and littleness. Certitude is denied; confidence is made possible....” He goes on to say that faith is not a possession like a Visa card that some have and others don't. It is an ongoing response to God, the world, and life, matter of decision taken over and over again, and in the presence of much evidence to the contrary. Faith includes doubt, he says, but it keeps doubt from becoming mere cynicism or nihilism. (“Bound and Free”)

One final image pointing to another facet of what it means to believe. We believe because we are grasped. It is not only that we venture and give ourselves in loving trust. More basic than that we are embraced in the depths of our being. We do not, cannot, possess God. But we can be aware that God possesses us.

This theme was set forth compellingly by New Testament scholar John Knox in one of his books some years ago: “Sometimes faith has been thought of as a venture, a betting on what is..only a possibility, a risking of one's life on the hypothesis of God's reality. I used to speak in this way sometimes but no longer find this kind of language quite true...For faith is the experience of being grasped by God's indubitable reality, the actual knowing of him by whom we are fully known, the actual resting in him who made us for himself.” (“Myth and Truth”)

How to come by this kind of faith? Notice the accent on experience. Faith is the experience of being grasped by God's indubitable reality!

John Vaught, a fine Roman Catholic scholar strikes a similar note in a very recent book. Vaught writes a lot about science and religion and their different ways of knowing. The transcendent cannot be known, he says, in the way that ordinary objects are known. “In fact, religion is less a matter of knowing than of being known. It is a state of being grasped rather than of grasping...Science deals with what can be sensed, or at least what can be inferred from sensation. Religion is based upon experience too, but of a different kind from science. Religious people testify to having felt, beneath all sensible appearances, the very real presence of an elusive mystery that takes hold of them, invites them, sometimes unsettles them and often reorients their lives.” (“Is Nature Enough?”)

Along with this understanding there is the awareness of God as the Seeker, the Hunter, the Hound of Heaven. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me...Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalm 139) Consider the picture of the seeking, pursuing God in those two famous parables in Luke: the good shepherd who goes out after the lost sheep and the woman who lights her lamp and searches high and low until she finds her lost coin. Augustine once started a sermon on the lost coin by exclaiming, “Holy Divinity has lost her money, and it is us!” (“Quest for the Living God”, E. Johnson) Indeed, we who fancy ourselves seekers after truth are the ones who are sought!

The Jewish philosopher/theologian Abram Heschel has been so helpful on this point. He notes that most theories of religion start out with defining the religious situation as the human search for God and assume that God is silent, hidden, and unconcerned with the human search. These assumptions are incomplete and false. The Bible speaks not only of the human search for God but also of God's search for human beings. God's will is involved in our yearning. “All human history as described in the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: God is in search of man. Faith in God is a response to God's question.” (“God in Search of Man”)

Echo is a related image. Our searching is a response, an echo, of God's searching for us. Our praying is an echo of God's praying for us. Our singing is an echo of the music of God's kingdom.

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing  
It sounds an echo in my soul, I cannot keep from singing

We may be asked why we believe in God. We may be able to give reasons why faith is at least a legitimate option for a thoughtful person. We may be able to point to persons, events, books, circumstances, experiences which lured us toward faith. We may point to the Light which shines in Christ, in the prophets, in the saints, in the Biblical witness. But in the last analysis there is no adequate explanation. We believe because we cannot help it. We have an awareness, usually very dim, but there nonetheless, that we belong to Another. We cannot catch and hold God with the claws of our minds. But we can be aware that we are sought and embraced by a Holy Mystery, a gracious power, a loving claim.