

We've Had It Backwards

Proper 25A - October 23, 2011

Based upon the work of Peter Rollins, Ph.D. in The Fidelity of Betrayal

Today, we are going to be talking about a mistake churches have been making a long time, but first, here's a story about another kind of mistake. A minister is driving down the road and is stopped for speeding. The state trooper smells alcohol on his breath, sees an empty wine bottle on the floor, and asks, "Sir, have you been drinking?" The minister replies, "Just water." The trooper asks, "Then why do I smell wine?" The minister looks down at the bottle and exclaims, "Good Lord, He's done it again!"

At the very center of the mission, the purpose of our church lies the task of reaching as many people as possible with the Good News of God's love; the task of touching as many lives as possible with the love of God who lives in & through & all around us. But that is not all; there is more. In addition to telling & touching, it is our responsibility to provide in this place the kind of environment & experiences in which men, women & children may make contact with the Sacred as well as commit themselves to growing in their loyalty to & deep communion with God. We are supposed to both create opportunities for the miracle of faith to erupt within people as well as to help, teach & encourage each other to be ever more faithful & courageous followers of Jesus. The evidence of the miracle of faith is in the way in which it transforms the individual's inner world, changing the entire trajectory of that person's life in a positive, healing way.

However, the Christian Church has emphasized the importance of what we "believe," that is, think about God rather than the transformative miracle of the experience of God. So often we find an emphasis on belief, followed by behavior, that then leads into belonging.' For instance, if a Christian is sharing his or her faith, the discussion will likely concern a set of beliefs that one is asked to accept; beliefs that will often include the existence of God, the deity of Christ, the existence of sin, and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. If these are accepted then the individual will be asked to engage in a certain behavior, that is, to pray, repent, and join the local church. Then, once this has taken place, that individual will be welcomed into the Christian community, being invited to get involved in the life of the church. This approach works with the underlying idea that belief is of prime importance in Christianity, followed by behavior, followed by belonging. This is precisely backwards. It is the opposite of what we should be doing.

In contrast to this let us briefly consider the birth of an infant. When a child enters the world she does not begin with a system of beliefs that must be accepted before she belongs to the family. The infant, in a healthy environment, begins her life with absolute, unconditional acceptance. The infant belongs to the family as the family now belongs to the infant. As the child grows she gradually learns to engage in the various rituals in which the family engages. These will include times when the family members eat together, play together, relax together, and so on. Then the child will begin to form a set of beliefs about the world into which she is already embedded. These will generally begin by mimicking the beliefs of the parents. Then these beliefs will likely come into conflict with those of the parents as she attempts to wrestle with the world for herself and test limits. And finally she will often come into some equitable relationship with the parents' beliefs, agreeing with some and disagreeing with others. Within a healthy, loving family each of these stages will be welcomed and allowed room to breathe. This approach thus places belonging first, followed by behavior, followed last and least, by belief. This model is what we find in operation within a broadly Hebraic approach to faith,

an approach that emphasizes belonging to the community and engaging in the shared rituals of that community. When it comes to "beliefs," that is, to theoretical or speculative reflection upon the nature of God, the spiritual life & religious experiences, there is an acknowledgment that we will often think and rethink these at various times in our lives. What is important is that, regardless of the doubts and beliefs we have, we know that we have a vital place in the community and are encouraged to remain involved in the community conversation that, at its best, provides ample space for doubt, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

This is the wisdom contained in the Jewish parable that speaks of a heated debate taking place between two old and learned rabbis. The conversation in question revolves around a particularly complex and obscure verse in the Torah. It is not the first time that these two intellectual giants have crossed swords over this verse; in fact they have debated it for years, sometimes changing their opinions but never finding a consensus. God is, of course, known to have the patience of a saint, but even God begins to tire of the endless discussion. So finally God decides to visit the two men and tell them once and for all what the parable means. God reaches down, pulls the clouds apart, and begins to speak: *"You have been debating this verse endlessly for years; I will now tell you what it means"* But before God can continue, the two rabbis look up and say, in a rare moment of unity, *"Who are you to tell us what the verse means? You have given us the words, now leave us in peace to wrestle with it."*

In this parable we are reminded that the best approach to Scripture is not one in which we attempt to find out its definitive meaning, but rather where we wrestle with it & are transformed by it. The parable tells us not that a God's-eye view is impossible, but rather that even if it were possible it would not be wanted. Why? Because a God's-eye view of the truth would not be the truth for the person encountering it, that is, it would be experienced as external, separated & apart from one's own personal mind & soul. No..... developing how we think about God & the spiritual life requires full-body contact, full in-depth commitment & engagement, wholehearted personal involvement. Any interpretation of a verse that is given to us by any external source outside our own hearts & minds is not a true interpretation of the verse until we have done the personal work of making it our own. It does not become true until you have personally gotten involved in discovering the truth; until you have wrestled with God, the text & your own heart & mind.

For the rabbis in this story the truth of the Scriptures is revealed within the process of debate and discussion itself. The truth is testified to in the commitment to a constant unraveling and re-sowing of our ideas in relationship with the text - an approach that emphasizes the need for relationship (friends), shared rituals, and the place of diverse views & vigorous disagreement. Let us agree together, right here, right now, to make St. Luke's a place of sacred community where people are first & foremost given a place to belong & after being assured of their belonging, are invited into active participation in our community life & worship. And then, after many years of belonging, being & participating in the life of our sacred community intertwined with many years of wrestling, remaining in dialogue, agreeing & disagreeing with Scripture, Church tradition and their own capacity to think for themselves, let those who have come among us work out for themselves what to think about the nature of God, the spiritual life & their own personal religious experiences. Let us give that gift to one another & to all we encounter. The goal of our community life is not that we all agree; it is that we belong to one another as we learn how to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind & soul and how to love one another as we love ourselves. That's what it's ALL about! AMEN.