

Are You Sure?

Sermon for Proper 6 Year C - June 13, 2010

A pastor asked a little boy if he said his prayers every night. "Yes sir," the boy replied. "And, do you always say them in the morning, too?" the pastor asked. "No sir," the boy replied. "I ain't scared in the daytime."

This past Tuesday, I had a wonderful conversation with a fellow pastor who describes himself as conservative and evangelical. He is the senior minister of one of the largest churches in Summit County. Also present were the Rev. Robin Nygaard from Unity and our own Claudia+. One of the realities uncovered in the course of our 90-minute exchange is how differently we view the role of the preacher. My evangelical friend stated the purpose of a sermon is to give people something clear and solid in which to believe. He said something like, "When I get into the pulpit, I know that God is speaking through me. My job is to proclaim the word of God, the truth, the absolute truth of scripture. Unless I am clear about God's word, I cannot be of help to my congregation. I may leave them confused and uncertain." I noticed words and phrases such as certainty, clarity, truth, absolute truth and word of God were used quite a bit. In response, I assured my fellow pastor I think my job is that of asking people to think critically and reflect deeply upon their own lives and experiences of the Sacred in their lives and, consequently, to respond to, commit themselves to the love of God who lives in and through and all around them. I see the spiritual path to be all about the personal journey into the unknown, the adventure of a life of reckless loving and continuous learning guided by the same Spirit who was so clearly present in Jesus of Nazareth. I told him I did not think the spiritual path is about certainty or the quest to know "absolute truth" at all. It's about the relationships and learning that form during the sacred quest.

The ancient Greeks told a story which I think captures the spirit of what I am trying to describe. It is the story of Theseus. Aegeus one of the primordial kings of Athens, found a bride, Aethra. On their wedding night, Aethra, while laying by the sea had intercourse with Posiedon, the god of the sea. By the understanding of sex in antiquity, the mix of semen gave Theseus a combination of divine as well as mortal characteristics in his nature; such double fatherhood, one father immortal, one mortal, was a familiar feature of Greek heroes. When Aethra became pregnant, Aegeus decided to return to Athens. But before leaving, he buried his sandals and sword under a huge rock and told her that when their son grew up, he should move the rock, if he were hero enough, and take the tokens for himself as evidence of his royal parentage.

When Theseus grew up and became a brave young man, he moved the rock and recovered his father's sandals & arms. His mother then told him the truth about his father's identity and that he must take the weapons back to the king and claim his birthright. To get to Athens, Theseus could choose to go by sea (which was the safe way) or by land, following a dangerous path around the Saronic Gulf, where he would encounter a string of six entrances to the Underworld, each guarded by an evil, murderous demon. Young, brave and ambitious, Theseus decided to go by the land route, by the route most difficult, dangerous, challenging and adventurous. And indeed, he encounters the six demons, faces each with courage and bravery, and conquers one after another. With each victory he grows in strength, courage, and wisdom.

Now, King Minos of Crete had waged war with the Athenians and was successful. He then demanded that, at nine-year intervals, seven Athenian boys and seven Athenian girls were to be sent to Crete to be devoured by the Minotaur, a half-man, half-bull monster that lived in a great cave labyrinth or maze. Theseus volunteered to slay the monster. On his arrival in Crete, King Minos' daughter Ariadne, out of love for Theseus, gave him a ball of string so he could find his way out. As soon as Theseus entered the labyrinth, he tied one end of the ball of string to the door post. Theseus followed the wisdom of a trusted friend to go forwards, always down and never left or right within the cave. Theseus came to the heart of the labyrinth and also upon the sleeping Minotaur. The beast awoke and a tremendous fight then occurred. Theseus overpowered the Minotaur with his strength and used his sword to stab the

beast in the throat. After decapitating the beast, Theseus used the string to escape the labyrinth and managed to escape with all of the young Athenians and Ariadne. In this series of heroic journeys, Theseus develops the wisdom and strength to become the founder-king of Athens.

Wisdom and strength, wholeness and healing, virtue and peace of mind are never long-held by hiding from ourselves or the world, nor by avoiding all pain and discomfort, nor by having someone else tell us what to think while promising certainty. The two greatest figures in the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus, were men willing to overturn the huge rock and put on the sandals of adventure. Neither choose to take the easy path of the sea, but both chose to travel the land route, the route guaranteed to take them into confrontation with evil and tyranny. And in the end, both were executed by the state for making so many others uncomfortable and insecure.

Why do so many within the religious community assume Christianity to be about security and certainty? Why do so many insist certainty and knowing absolutes are possible? From "Experimental Theology" by Richard Beck: "Robert Burton in his book, On Being Certain: Believing You are Right Even When You're Not, suggests certainty is a feeling. There is a feeling we have when we are confident we know something. To experience this feeling for yourself, Burton asks us to recall a recent tip of the tongue experience. Think of meeting someone knowing you know her name but being unable to recall it. That feeling of knowing--"I know this!"--combined with a lack of content (being unable to recall the name) nicely separates the content of knowledge (the name) from the feeling of knowing (the feeling inherent in the tip of the tongue experience)." In short, feeling certain I know something cannot be equated with actually knowing it, with accuracy & truth. Furthermore, it's important to note the feeling that I know something, the feeling of certainty is pleasurable. It's like ice cream for the brain. Burton argues this is one of the reasons why religious dogmatism, the claim of certainty in matters of God and religious ideas, is so stubborn. Religious dogmatism is rooted in this pleasure sensation, this flight from the anxiety experienced in not being sure. Burton notes, "We aren't dealing with rationality. We are working with an emotional system. Overtly, the conversation is about biblical texts or rational arguments. But at root is what is governing the conversation is the feeling of knowing. And if the person feels they are right then quality counter-arguments just won't penetrate."

In today's Gospel lesson, the Pharisee with whom Jesus is sharing a meal, is absolutely certain he knows what God desires. He knows all about God because he has studied the Torah (scriptures) meticulously. He feels he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt Jesus should have nothing to do with this woman "who is a sinner." Enveloped fully in the bubble-warp of his own religious traditions, assumptions and need for security, he "knows" this woman is unworthy to enter his home and must undergo the prescribed religious rituals of the Temple before she can be loved and forgiven by God. And Jesus takes all that tradition, all those assumptions and all that certainty of knowing and takes them out with the garbage. It's as if Jesus was saying to the Pharisee, "I know you are deeply religious and you honor the traditions of our community, but your mind is closed. You have blindfolded yourself with your need for a secure structure and the assurance of being right. Take off your blindfold. Open the eyes of your heart and see. If your religious studies and traditions do not make you a more loving and accepting person, if your need for certainty is more important than your need to love and show compassion, set them aside. It's not about being religious. It's about changing the world by loving & accepting one person at a time." AMEN.