

“I Believe; Help My Unbelief”

Sunday, December 3, 2006

The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
24 Fountain St., NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

www.fountainstreet.org

Printed by
THE EXTENSION SERVICE
of
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

Copyright © 2006 by Fountain Street Church

To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“I Believe; Help My Unbelief”

READINGS

‘Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so’...And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.

From chapter 9 of the book of Mark

* * *

There are many creeds, but only one universal faith...A minimum of creed and a maximum of faith is the ideal synthesis.

From Rabbi Avraham Yeshua Heschel – “A Philosophy of Religion”

* * *

Men with faith can face martyrdom while men without it feel stricken when they are not invited to dinner.

*From Walter Lippman, his address to the
Catholic Philosophical Association in 1941*

* * * * *

SERMON

A curious text to cite for Advent, the story of Jesus healing the epileptic boy. First of all, it has nothing to do with the nativity. Second and more important overall, it is not the sort of passage rational and progressive religion prefers, involving ‘healing’ epilepsy which even modern faith healers do not do. To make things worse, it comes on the heels of one of the most fantastic episodes in Christian scripture, the Transfiguration when Jesus is joined by Elijah and Moses and God booms a direct message from the skies. And the message of the passage is clearly that one must believe in order to merit divine favor. So why use it, then?

My first fall in clergy life, even before I was formally ordained, I was with the chil-

dren and youth one evening. The church is dead center in Massachusetts. Point your finger at the middle and there you are, Petersham, a town I call centrally isolated – an hour from anything remotely like a city. The town itself had only 900 citizens and the church only 90 members.

That evening, the darkness was pitch. We arrived by car and truck at a little dam which formed a pond near a small log house owned by a member. I can still smell the wood stove and summon the memory of those days. But we were not going inside his house. Rob had us all join hands in a long line and led us through the woods in the pitch black. Only he knew exactly where the path was. We went down by the pond and through bushes and beside trees, places we could not see but only feel and smell and hear. Though none of us had blindfolds on, the cloudy night and remoteness from all houses meant that only the faintest shadows and outlines were visible. Truly, we all had to hang on to each other's hands or get lost.

Nothing is more basic to religion than beliefs. In their firmest form they are called doctrines, notions like atonement and incarnation that even if most people do not know Aquinas or Calvin (the theologians not the schools) or Ramakrishna for that matter, and have never heard of the Synod of Dort or the Thirty Nine Articles or the Brihadaranyaka, they do think there are certain concepts which one must believe true in order to be a faithful member of that religion.

Quarrels over what must be believed are the cause of ten thousand conflicts, from the personal and merely intellectual differences between Rabbis Hillel and Akiba, to the scorched earth campaign against the Waldensians of medieval France and the fierce violence between Hindus and Muslims during the partition of 1949. It is said that when the papal army came to a Waldensian city a lieutenant asked the general how they should tell the difference between heretics and Catholics and the general responded, "Kill them all; God will know his own."

For ten thousand reasons, therefore, we have rejected such belief. So what do we mean by faith, then? For two generations this church has named faith, hope, love, and joy as the themes of advent – deliberately dissenting from the formal themes since medieval days of death, judgment, heaven and hell. While it may be obvious that such grim notions are out of touch with the season, what makes faith worth celebrating instead? Sam Harris is getting famous, if not rich, with his book "The End of Faith," in which he scalds religion and calls for an end to it altogether. Some scientists are 'taking the gloves off' as a *New York Times* article puts it, and saying science ought to be more forthright about criticizing religion and its fantastic assertions. Maybe our faith in faith is misplaced.

An ancient proverb says that the beginning of wisdom is calling things by their correct names. Faith and belief seem to be synonyms, but they are not. I think that's where the problem lies. And we can see it back there in the curious text from Mark, where the father of the epileptic boy says, "I believe, help my unbelief."

That incongruous phrase exists because the Greek word for belief, *pisteuw*, means faith as well as belief. We use faith more generally, as a general sense of trust, not a specific list of beliefs. Such broadness is more like the Latin word used for this con-

cept, fidelity. Fidelity is the closest to what the text means, but English has no verb to have faith as Latin and Greek does. The Latin verb to have faith is *fido*, or *Fido*, a name applied to dogs who are legendarily loyal creatures. Having faith is not the same as believing this creed or that doctrine. In fact, in a sense, they are opposites.

One of the great ironies today is that both believers and skeptics have the same mistaken notion of faith – that it is about allegiance to truth claims about God and related notions. Our own Gary Eberle has done some analysis showing that the word *true*, like the word *believe*, has an older meaning more connected to loyalty and fidelity than to factual and objective. There is an old song that catches that. “I would be true.” Dick Tracy was enamored of Tess Trueheart. Someone of reliable loyalty is called “true blue.” ***Rather than faith meaning you must believe certain things to be true, faith means be true to the things you believe.***

Which leads me back to the walk in the woods. Every one of us had to trust, have faith in, and thus believe in, Rob, who was leading us. We also had to trust the person on either side of us, believe they were, in turn, holding on to the person next to them and so on. Finally, we each had to trust, believe in, our own selves. Such activities are called trust walks, in fact.

The shift of words like faith and truth from meaning one’s own personal reliability to some external objective reliability, is at the heart of both religious fundamentalism and scientific skepticism. Both believe the same thing, namely that faith means loyalty to some external eternal objective factuality. Neither notices that the act of believing always entails that older sense of faith and truth, being true to self and others. Neither religious people nor skeptics remember that we come to believe in certain ideas alone. We find them through other people, be they books or the people we know. In short, we believe in people, have faith in people, and in a twist on the usual sense, are true to people.

Our faith shapes our beliefs as much as our beliefs shape our faith. They are in constant dialogue, as we measure whether those we trust are worthy, whether the values they hold are at work, whether we share those values with them and so on. The father of the epileptic boy is like us, responding to Jesus’ declaration that “All things are possible to one who believes,” who trusts fully. The father is saying, “I have faith, I trust you, but I am not perfect in my trust.”

We all trust and believe; we have to. We trust that tomorrow will come, that the house won’t burn down, that we will not be struck by lightning or a heart attack or other calamity. Common sense says that mostly we can trust reality. And mostly we can trust our friends and family. But mostly is not always. So we go to the dentist and the doctor for checkups, and we put curfews on our children and lock our car doors and balance our checkbooks and other less than trusting acts. It is not that we are suspicious of everything, but we know we are imperfect creatures and should be, as scripture elsewhere states, ‘wise as serpents and innocent as doves.’

Heck, what sort of faith and trust would we have if we gave it perfectly without ever thinking? Doesn’t the act of giving faith necessarily imply some doubt? Of course. Whether it is self doubt or reasonable doubt or outright suspicion, having faith is and should be a willing act, one we choose, not grant automatically. Like weddings,

where we must state our fidelity out loud on purpose, in advance, without perfect assurance, we have to declare our faith in other ways as well, or what good is it?

Jesus heals the boy even though the father was imperfect in his faith. So does he do it despite the father's unbelief? Or does he do it because of his faith? I think it is because of both. The father trusted himself enough to confess both his trust and doubt, which, as any logician will confirm, is itself an act of faith and trust. Sometimes the greatest act of faith is to confess your lack of faith – to expose your uncertainty in yourself, in someone else, in God.

I am speaking of the faith behind faith. It is when we tell someone we are not sure, not certain, but are willing to trust anyway. As when I let a little girl lead me through the dark, or when I promised myself to my wife thirty years ago, or held my son when he was born, or came to lead to you.

We have to believe in ourselves even when we find it hard to believe in general. If we wait until we are certain we will wait forever. We will make mistakes, be betrayed, fail, get lost. But at every moment, there in the dark, a hand is out there waiting to lead us, and asking us to lead it. Will you grab it? That, friends, is what faith is about.