

Our Mysterious Faith

Sermon by Bob Carlsten

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There are three important lessons I hope we can all use from a review of my faith journey:

- 1) "Certainty" leaves little room for the Holy Spirit to work within us, and transmit the Gospel for our day.
- 2) We have need for REPENTANCE & FORGIVENESS.
- 3) Take action to resist the Powers.

In connection with this last we would do well to remember the saints & heroes who have gone before us, including the Christ, who liberated us from the captivity of the Powers.

As a young Methodist attending Monmouth, a Presbyterian college, with required daily chapel, and then a 10 year stint as a casualty insurance adjuster I felt the call to the Baptist ministry. Why Baptist? I witnessed the faith and life of a respected fellow adjuster and my family of four went to his church where my 1st wife Dollee and I were rebaptized. About a year later the pastor and I began one on one weekly sessions that soon morphed into a Scripture memory course developed by the Navigators. My journey took a right turn to more "certainty". My interest grew stronger in preparing for teaching an adult forum than reading insurance adjusting manuals, so off to seminary.

While at Northern Baptist Seminary in Chicago's West side I became a counselor in one of Billy Graham's crusades, deepening my certainty about God and salvation. In spite of my going down the right "fork in the road" I grew uneasy with the conservative faculty, 2 of whom were advocates of "every word" inspiration of the Scriptures. Berkeley Baptist Seminary in California had a more progressive reputation. So with trailer in tow the 4 of us moved to Berkeley; with the car's brakes and transmission bands smoking while descending scary slopes.

In the early 60s, we were right across the street from the UC campus, and about 2 blocks from Telegraph Ave, where the Hippies paraded with four letter word signs. I think I was beginning to lose some of my certainty. Later I learned the real message behind those crass 4 letter word signs: "This isn't profanity -- What we're doing in Vietnam - that's profanity".

My faith grew stronger at Berkeley, while shedding some of my certainty, but really isn't that what "faith" is all about? It's not intellectual assent to some well learned verses in the Bible, or even in the life of Jesus. It's tantamount to trusting in something or someone that we can't fully comprehend or understand, and has no scientific evidence. Faith is tied to hope.

A couple weeks ago in a discussion with a lawyer friend about the current grim political scene and cultural malaise, he asked if I had any hope. This question, from a man who every year visits his 102

year old grandmother in Israel, took me by surprise. I said: "Daniel, I can't give in to cynicism and despair which leads to inaction. Hope and love have to rule in the end."

Now to return to my journey about 45 years before that discussion. After graduating Berkeley we went to a small church in the foothills of the Sierra, Sonora Baptist Church, where I was ordained. It had been an historical church from back in the gold rush days and had to close for about 2 decades. The American Baptist Convention supported it's reopening by paying 1/2 of the minister's salary.

I was eager to liberate them from a conservative theology; so in my ordination paper I questioned the relevance of doctrines, such as the virgin birth. That and some of my other sermons did not sit well with the lay-leader of the church who happened to be a Southern Baptist transplant from L.A., and also the owner of the radio station that broadcast our services. He requested a meeting that was attended by representatives of the seminary, and the American Baptist Convention who were both ambivalent about supporting me in the face of losing large donors from the Fresno Valley. It was mutually agreed that I should move on; since the small church was evenly divided between those wanting and those fearing a more progressive theology.

The Methodist minister in Sonora suggested I come back to my childhood roots, where they don't quarrel over theology. I did and went to the Holly Methodist Church for three fulfilling years. While Methodists don't over heat on theology they do have some divisive social issues. Alas, they are as deeply divided on homophobic issues as the Mennonites are. That, and many still glorify war as our defense of democracy. Dr. Walter Wink, author of *The Powers Trilogy*, was a Methodist exception and one of my heroes. He did a great exegesis on Mk.5:39 of "turn the other cheek" as an example of creative, nonviolent opposition to evil. "The Powers That Be" is an accessible summary of his trilogy, and a very good read! His journey is worth checking out on line.

I left the "ministry" in 1970, during the Vietnam War, and after taking some heat for my opposition to it. I didn't leave the church, because I have a deeply held belief that the Gospel or Good News could not be transmitted from one generation to the next just by a book. The Bible is still very important to my journey, but the Gospel also needs the Holy Spirit working thru people to give it life in a changing world. This is lesson # 1, so I'll repeat: "The Gospel needs the Holy Spirit working thru people to give it life in a changing world", The Church, like the Bible is not perfect; both are filtered through imperfect, sinful human beings.

"Sinful", for those who don't like the term because of negative sexual baggage, just means "MISSING THE MARK" - of God's high calling. That may be more egregious to God than our sexual fantasies, unless we act in such a way to violate another person. While I have never knowingly violated another sexually, even my wives, I can't begin to count the ways that I have sinned by not answering God's high calling.

I was attending Arvada Mennonite Church when Peter Edigar was accused of groping multiple women, undoubtedly that was SIN, but in light of his confession and repentance, not only the local, but the

broader Mennonite Church missed God's high calling to forgive. This is lesson #2, "We have need for REPENTANCE & FORGIVENESS. Both the Lord's Prayer and "Judge not lest ye be judged" are clear on that "calling". It's not for me to judge which of these two offenses is the worst in God's sight. I'm also, not sure the church has that right. Which is the greater sin? Peter's or the Church's? Some called it cheap grace to forgive, if Peter didn't pay for counseling the victims. How could a man who was reduced to delivering pizza to eat and shelter himself, be expected to do that?

Dollee and I began attending the United Church of Christ in 1973, closer to our home and our progressive values. She passed away about 4 years later, after a year & 1/2 battle with colon cancer. 2 weeks before the end they told us it had spread to the kidneys and another surgery would probably only buy her 4 to 6 months. With no surgery she would gradually go into a coma and slip away at the age of 48. We had time at home to discuss what might lie beyond the veil of mystery. The pastor had been very good and comforting to us, but 3 months later he left for another church in Illinois. I was left with greater mystery about God's love and what lies on the far side of the veil. I decided to move on before a new pastor came. The idea of connecting with an historical peace church led me to Arvada Mennonite.

Before attending AMC I had never really acted on my beliefs in nonviolence, or nuclear or racial injustice matters. In retrospect, considering my background and knowledge, I had missed God's high calling. Both repentance and action were required. I began by attending the prayer vigils at Rocky Flats nuclear plant on Sundays after church. Next, after prayerful consideration I entered Rocky Flats one snowy Christmas night with the aid of a support group from AMC. One of the main purposes for civil disobedience is to talk to a jury and hope that they will follow their conscience rather than the orders of the judge on how to interpret the law. Usually a "necessity defense" is not allowed and was not in my case. That is: violating a smaller law for a greater good.

Even though I was found guilty of trespass and had to pay the maximum fine of \$1,000 plus community service, I felt empowered that I had finally acted on my convictions. It had nothing to do with earning grace or forgiveness. Christ showed us that God's love already forgives upon repentance. The action was for my peace of mind and empowerment to take other small steps of resistance to injustice. LESSON # 3, Take action to resist the Powers.

I say all of this to encourage others to take small steps of civil disobedience and resistance to the "Powers". We all are in greater peril today than we were in the 70s & 80s "Cold war", due to the growing economic gap, global warming, and violent domination, not to mention the use of our tax dollars for growing the technology of destruction. This is not partisan politics; both major parties feed at the same corporate dollars trough. In closing, Dr. Timothy Snyder says in his little book, "Tyranny", "we need to defend and strengthen our institutions to resist". I add the "Faith Community" to his list of institutions because I feel the wars of the twentieth century happened in part due to the "Faith Community" missing the mark of God's high calling: to resist, not by vanquishing opponents, but to be agents of God's love, for their transformation. Amen