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Wrong Relationship... with Faith
Feb 28, 2021 Lent 2B

As much as I'd like for life to be understandable, outline-able, comprehensible, neat, and orderly, I've had to accept that life is messy. As much as I'd like people to be comprehensible, maybe not totally predictable but at least always positive, and smart enough to act what they believe, I've had to accept that people & relationships with them are messy. We get things wrong: places where we are fearful affect our faith; places where we are wounded affect our faith. Places where we have misunderstood affect our faith; places where we have sin affects our faith; places where we've been unconscious affects our faith.

These weeks of Lent that lead up to the point where the world, hand in hand with bad religion, kills Jesus for what he's saying and teaching, are good weeks for us to examine how things can go so wrong even in faith, much less in being misled by the world; they are good weeks to look at where we have avoided the call of faithfulness or mistaken it, due to our messiness and our sinfulness. Last week we looked at the way we humans can be in wrong relationships with the created world where we God made us and put us. This week we're looking at ways we humans can be in wrong relationships to faith. I started with the 2 scriptures in Mark and Genesis, and went from there for a sermon, remembering my own failures and some weird statements I've heard from people along the line of ministering. Let us remember that it's a lot easier to see the wrong things that other people do than it is to see our own errors; Jesus pointed to this when he reminded his followers that before they try and get a splinter out of someone else's eye, first remove the log in your own eye! So when I give some illustrations here from my past experiences, I am also calling into question my own faults.

It's true that faith continues to evolve and grow through all the experiences of life, good or bad. Everything we encounter can deepen our understanding, can correct bad thinking or distortions we've held. God's Spirit continues to walk with us and teach us about faith, as we lean into God and keep our gaze on God's face. When we use our imaginations to realize just how immense God is, how awesome, how mysterious, how "other," why in the world do we expect faith in God to be one and done? to be definitive? We miss the mark, then correct; then we miss the mark another way, and correct.

It seems to me that there are several general themes to the ways we get into wrong relationships to our faith. For example, we hear God's word but think we have better ideas. Or we think it's OK to tweak them - especially where they begin to impinge on us. Or sometimes we want to show God a shortcut. We can make faith into a bunch of precepts that we affirm without it changing our living and behaviors; or, on the other hand, we can turn faith into a list of rules kept by our own ego-strength, and forget the love in our heart. It's easy to drift into any of these wrong relationships to faith. Let's look at our Scriptures for today;

I'd like to point out that Jesus' follower Peter both gets it incredibly right one minute and slips up the next. He's so human, isn't he? He both sees that Jesus is the Messiah and yet doesn't get it. He is spot on, insightful, realizing Jesus is the longed for, hoped for, anointed one of God....then the next minute - "Oh, Jesus, it's not right you should talk about suffering and dying - let me tell you MY idea! It will be so much better!" Right in one second - Jesus might be the messiah, but Peter knows a better way.

There was an elder in a previous congregation, who, after a sermon one day, observed, "Well, I guess Jesus is a little left of me." What do you say to a statement like that, huh? I was floored...I couldn't say aloud what I was thinking - well, you've certainly heard Jesus' point of view - do you think maybe you ought'a just reconsider your view?!?! Jesus might have one opinion, he seemed to say, but I'm sticking to mine anyway - it's at least equal and maybe better.

Jesus says, so you want me to preserve and keep my life, huh? But that would kill my soul. That's not my purpose, that's not my call. Trying to preserve things like my life and the status quo is not the path of the soul. In fact, that will deaden the soul. The way of the soul is to let go of the desires to hold on to the way things are, and follow the way of the gospel, listen to the words of my kingdom, and do them.

Abraham and Sarah, having had God make a covenant with them for a great number of progeny, and having heard God say the covenant was with both of them, and that Sarah would bear Abraham a child, fall into the "shortcut" mode of believing God. But as we read the other chapters that tell the story of these two of our faith ancestors, they get impatient with God's timing....so they decided to help God with a shortcut. "Hmm, you know, Sarah's old, and if her handmaid has a child, it's like it's Sarah's child anyway..." (We see this way of thinking later

when Rachel and Leah, both married to Jacob, each try to be the most important wife by having the most kids, using their handmaids. So I guess that kind of thinking was around.)

No, their shortcut didn't turn out to be a good idea, as Abraham eventually kicks out Hagar and her son Ishmael. And God's version DOES come about, when Abraham and Sarah have a late child, Isaac.

Now consider the concern of almost all smaller churches - they all say they want to grow. More people worshiping God and more children in Church School - isn't that a good thing? We know that it's God's job to add people to the church, to call and woo, to forgive and restore. We can't save people - God does that. But you know if we had a better organ... or a better preacher with small kids... or fancier facilities... or big signs....wouldn't that help it go faster? I was the visiting moderator for a church that sold its parsonage (we call it a 'manse' in presbyterian language) and had the money then for 3 years of a full-time pastor - they worked it out that the new pastor with kids would draw 2 families, who would each draw 2 more, who would each draw 2 more - and by golly the pews would be full again! They skipped the parts about deepening their own spiritual lives, learning to talk about their faith, seeking true encounters with whatever people that God laid on their hearts and brought to their doors - that takes too long, too much work. They called their married, male, pastor with 2 young children, and didn't know what to do with the folks who visited, who were black like the neighborhood, and the growth never happened.

If we had read today's passage from Romans which was also about Abraham and Sarah, we would have seen the apostle Paul arguing that Abraham's faith was shown in his trust in God, NOT because he followed the rules of the Law - in fact, the Law didn't come for many, many generations afterwards! Faith isn't about rules, Paul argues - or else how could God declare that Abraham and Sarah were justified by their faith?

I've told too many stories about my own upbringing and all the cultural mores that were turned into the marks of true Christians - skirt length and sideburn length, for example, and smoking and drinking. Let's look at some current "rules" that have been turned into litmus tests of faith by some of our sisters and brothers - the main one is abortion - there are believers in our country who will not recognize the faith in God of anyone who is in favor of safe and legal choices for women. Now abortion is an emotional issue, yes; and complicated and layered. In this era, it's virtually impossible to have a decent and nuanced dialogue - for certain folks, it's

the one and only 'yay or nay' test of true faith, no matter how devoted one is to Christ. "Turn or burn" is the way a youth group in one town made signs to say. You might speak the Christian words, but it's either our way or the highway to hell.

Another congregation I worked with were proud of their long heritage at an important street corner, and were very knowledgeable about the doctrines and beliefs of the Christian faith. But it didn't move into their hearts - and they thought they could pick and choose what things Jesus said that they'd follow. A man in leadership in that church thought it was his right to let his anger out on the pastor and other leaders - bitter words, vicious anger, abusive temper tantrums - and still be considered a pillar of the church. Faith had little to do with how he lived and treated people. In another church, a couple quit coming to our book group when we decided to read a book about racism - in their opinion, that was not an appropriate topic for church - like faith doesn't have anything to say about bigotry and racial divisions, and they were free to decide so.

These are all wrong relationships to faith. The older I get, the more I realize that faith is actually pretty simple - yet draws the length and breadth and width of life in its net. Faith is a whole way of seeing and living that grows inside us by the Spirit of God, when our hearts are open to God and we have put our trust in our loving God. Faith invades everything of life, makes us new from the inside out, transforming us into a new person. Faith is walking with God, as God walks with us, and looking so intently at God that we become like mirrors of Jesus - although we need to be cleaned here and there, and polished up so our reflection is truer. There are some things about faith we can state, but working out what they mean in human encounters is where the rubber hits the road. There will be behavioral changes and things of our culture that we discard, but it's out of love and not following rules. We can't improve on what God says or help God with shortcuts - God is in charge, and faith will trust in God's promise. AMEN.

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