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What Does It Mean to be Strong in Faith

A sermon given by
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Have you ever felt intimidated by what you perceive to be somebody else's stronger faith? They seem so sure. They seem so confident. They seem so certain, as if they have a pipeline. Perhaps after a conversation with that person you find yourself feeling a little bit unsettled, a little bit ill at ease, perhaps even a little bit insecure. Sometimes we can feel this way and we don't even need to be in a conversation with anybody. You can just take a drive into Missouri!

Last weekend Linda and I took a plunge into the Show Me state, went down to the Ozarks and stayed at Table Rock Lake, a beautiful area of deciduous trees turning magnificent colors, and canyons and valleys and hills and lakes and bays and estuaries. An absolutely gorgeous place. Also down in that country we found churches the size of castles. We found their neon signs, so bright they could blind Paul on the road to Damascus. We found theology everywhere, on the bumper stickers of the cars in front of us, and what struck me most was the church signboards. There was none of this United Church of Christ whimsical "God is Still Speaking. Never place a period where God has placed a comma." It was almost the exact opposite as if what was really meant was "Never place a comma where God has placed a period." We drove by one church sign that said, "Free tickets to heaven. Details inside." And I thought, "Boy, that would do a lot for church attendance." Then we drove a little further and another boasted without any irony, no wink-wink, nod-nod, "Jesus is Lord of the Ozarks." And I wondered, well, who's Lord of the Rockies or the Appalachians?

I also realized that we may laugh but must also be careful that we do not betray a certain elitism of a college town that can look down its nose at a largely rural and impoverished region of the country. And we realize that at the end of the day we all are a bit insecure when it comes to life's most impenetrable questions. It's only human to feel, if only I had this special knowledge. If only my faith was stronger. If only I was a little bit more sure and certain.

On Thursday afternoon I was at Dillon's and I felt this tug inside of me and I was aware of my own professional vulnerability. I ran into a friend of mine in the check-out line, and in the conversation we began talking about cancer and chemotherapy. His wife is going through chemotherapy. That conversation led quickly to the conversation about what happens and where do you go after you die?

Now I know you're saying, "Whoa Pete, couldn't you just have said, 'How about those Hawks!'" But I didn't, and we had a profound conversation in the parking lot at Dillon's. He said to me, "Nobody's ever come back from the dead to tell us what's going to happen. I don't know what happens after you die." And I looked at him and said, "You know, I'm a pastor and I don't know either." Then he said to me, "But at least you admit it. At least you're honest."

As we parted ways, I wondered if I couldn't have given him just a little bit more assurance than I did. I realize that uncertainty creates unease. John Dewey, the American philosopher, said, "It is human nature, this quest for certainty."

So, what do we mean when we talk about what makes for a strong faith? What do we mean when we say a person has a strong faith? Are we suggesting that that person appears to be more certain about what they believe? Are we equating strong faith with a certain faith? And if we're saying that, isn't it problematic? To say a faith is based on certainty is a bit of an oxymoron. Paul, after all, in Hebrews Chapter 11, spoke about faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." What is the mark of a strong faith? Could you argue that a strong faith may be one that is marked by a lack of certainty?

To help us unravel this quandary we get into when we confuse strong faith with certainty and having answers, I turn to the author Karen Armstrong, who's just written a fabulous new book called, "The Case for God." I highly recommend it. She contends, as a historian, that in most pre-modern cultures there were two ways of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge. The Greeks had two words for these two ways: one is Logos and the other is Mythos. In ancient times, both were considered essential and neither was considered superior to the other.

Logos is reason, the pragmatic mode of thought that enables people to function in the world. Logos could help you build a weapon. It could help you organize your society. It was essential to survival, but it had its limitations. Mythos, on the other hand, was stories, never intended to be accurate accounts of an historical event but they were stories designed to help people negotiate the obscure regions of the psyche. These are Karen Armstrong's words. What logos could not do, but mythos could do is "assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles". For that, people turn to mythos. These days we live in a society of scientific logos, and mythos has fallen into disrepute. Karen Armstrong contends that "religion was never supposed to provide answers that lie within the competence of human reason; that is the role of logos. The task of religion is to help us live creatively, peacefully, and joyfully with realities for which there are no easy explanations."

Given the contrast between mythos and logos, I invite you to ponder how faith is less about logos and more about mythos. It's less about answers to perplexing questions of life and more about a way of being or a way of becoming in the world. It is as much about emptying ourselves of our ego and being open to the genuine experience of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, faith is less about what you know and more about who you are becoming. If that is the case, if certainty is not the ultimate currency of faith, then what passes for strong or weak faith can get turned on its head. If this is the case, then this is what Paul is talking about when he writes to the church at Corinth. He's talking about the difference between mythos and logos. He's talking about the difference in the way God sees faith and the way that we humans in the world see faith, when we says, in those famous words, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." Faith in God's eyes is not necessarily faith in the world's eyes. There is a reversal, the foolish to shame the

wise, the last will be first, the exalted will be humbled, the humble will be exalted. Everything is topsy-turvy.

Isn't this precisely the kind of faith that we encounter in the stories of Jesus in the Gospel? We see Jesus sitting down and having dinner with tax collectors and sinners and prostitutes. We see the story of the unclean woman who has suffered from hemorrhage for twelve years. In those days the unclean woman would be an outcast at the very bottom of the ladder of faith development. Yet it's that woman who says, "If only I could touch his garment I would be made well." And Jesus turned and seeing her, says "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well."

And which of the two in the Gospel who went to the temple to pray is justified in the eyes of God? Was it the one who bragged about his spiritual discipline and fasting, or the other who said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." It's that second one that Jesus says will enter the kingdom of heaven. His faith in the eyes of God is not necessarily what is faith in the eyes of the world.

We think that mastering faith, like every other discipline, is a taking on, a grasping of ideas. Yet it may be that faith is more a path than a construct. It's more a verb than a noun, more a journey than a destination. It's a voyage of discovery and not a quest for certainty.

On Wednesday night in our Plymouth Academy class we've been discussing the parables of the Gospels led by the pre-eminent New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crosson. What's been intriguing about this class is that it's so hard for us to accept Dominic Crosson's contention that the parables do not have one single answer, that there's not one interpretation for analyzing the truth of the parables, but many interpretations. In fact the parables are designed not to give answers but to invite the listener into an engagement, into an argument, into a dialogue, into a discussion where there's not one right answer. Somebody said in class, "You know, this is really scary, but it's also very freeing." The parables are a form of mythos, they're not logos.

We realize, as adults on our faith journeys, that the task may be about unlearning as much as it is learning, letting go of previously held ideas and emptying ourselves. A university professor came to the Zen master to ask him about Zen. Nan in the Zen master served him tea. He poured his visitor's cup and then he kept pouring. The professor watched until he could no longer restrain himself and said, "No more is going to go in." "Like this cup," Nan in said, "you are full of your own opinions. How can I teach you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

In that same way, we might look at Jesus less as the triumphant Lord of the world, and more as the one who emptied himself on the cross. So we, too, are invited to empty ourselves of all of our notions and ideas and be open to the presence of that spirit as we seek to glimpse the truth in our lives. These glimpses are the assurance that life is holy and sacred even when its mystery confounds us, and that we trust that there's love and grace that binds us together in ways we cannot even fully know.

For me, the most powerful moments of ministry have been those moments when those who are the most skeptical, the most disbelieving, have uttered the most amazing words of faith. I remember in my last church when a father, who was a self-avowed

non-believer was at the bedside of his daughter who had just died, and as we held hands, he said, “She is with the angels now.”

Who are we to say who has faith and who doesn't have faith? It is in moments when by God's grace our eyes are opened that we see what we were not able to see when we were locked in ourselves. It is when we get outside of our ego and our insecurity, when we are able to be emptied of ourselves, that we see our oneness with all life.

I'll tell you a true story. An Israeli by the name of Sherri Mandell experienced the loss of her son, Koby, fifteen years old, when he was killed by Palestinians in a brutal act of terrorism.

“Less than a year after our son was killed my husband and I marked our wedding anniversary by going out to dinner. I can't say we celebrated, we were so filled with pain over the loss of our son, but we went out to the restaurant anyhow to celebrate our anniversary.

“We walked into the restaurant; the smiling waitress with her shiny black hair had a spirit and effervescence I could only admire. I thought to myself, ‘She has no idea of the pain I'm living through.’”

Later, after the meal Sherri and her husband spoke with the manager about taking 15 poor or disadvantaged youth out to mark Koby's birthday. The manager said he volunteered at a nearby center that helped teens from poor, broken families, and he thought that the teenagers would appreciate going out with us.

Before the manager walked away, Sherri's husband said, “ ‘Do you know the Goodman family? They live around here and lost their 16-year-old son in an accident. We went to the Shiva and I wanted to know how they're doing?’ The manager then startled us when he told us, ‘You can ask them yourself. Your waitress is their daughter.’

“I looked at her and at her beauty and her spirit and I thought you never know what's going on inside a person. When she came over to our table we told her of our loss, and she shared her own. As we spoke, I realized how much of life is hidden. We don't see inside of people. As we shared our feelings...the pain lifted for a moment. Healing may occur when we reveal what is hidden inside of us. It brings us close to others.”

If we are open to the spirit, if we are not defensive or protective of our ego, we might, instead of comparing ourselves to others, be able to embrace them. Maybe, instead of saying, “Well, we at Plymouth would never hang out a sign saying, “Free tickets to heaven. Details inside,” we might embrace them. We might realize that this proclaims a deeper truth: God's grace is free and from time to time grace is found and heaven can be tasted here and now.

The burden of Sherri Mandell's grief was temporarily lifted when her own supposition about her waitress was challenged. That was the moment of her awakening.

“Faithing” may happen most of all here, when we are open and emptied of our suppositions, open to wonder and mystery, open to the glimpses God chooses to

reveal to us. Such moments may be the marks of the strongest faith of all. So I say, keep awake therefore. Keep awake. Amen