

Let God's Word be spoken, and let God's Word be heard.

Sailing Too Close to The Shore

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The lectionary gave us four components for today. As many know, it is a rolling three-year schedule (A, B, and C, using mainly the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with John interspersed here and there. At Advent, we began lectionary year A again). A Presbyterian sermon is supposed to explore a topic raised in one or more of the readings. Today's four choices were the usual two Old Testament components and two New Testament choices. I chose 1st Corinthians 12, read by Gwen Ito. The very first sentence of 1 Corinthians 12 reads: "Now concerning spiritual gifts brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be *uninformed*." The Gideon Bible I found in the Red Roof Inn in Utica had a different word: Paul says, I don't want you to be *uneducated*."

Some of us, myself included, need a logical framework to support our reflections on all readings and other religious learning, a context within which we can feel *informed*, or *educated*. Without a sound framework, some of us read the Bible and say to our self, "fine writing, even poetic, but not grounded in real life"; others might go to the opposite extreme, best summarized by Dr. Butzer in his 1962 pamphlet: "If any of you were brought up on what was called the literal inspiration of the Bible, by which it was maintained that all those who wrote these various books were literally secretaries or stenographers for God, who took down word for word just what God said, I say, if you can go on believing that, I'll not quarrel with you". He might not quarrel, but you knew he was politely skeptical.

I had breakfast with Rev. Yorty a month ago, and told him I am still plagued by theological doubts that cause me no end of angst, in that my heart has been committed to WPC forever, it seems - I got my Bible from Dr. Butzer in 1947, and he married us in 1964. BUT, my head can't get my mind wrapped around my faith in a way that feels OK, i.e., informed or educated, despite the number of wonderful people here that tell me I'm making it more complicated than it needs to be. Rev. Tom Stewart told me, "make the faith commitment, and behave accordingly. The learning will move along at its own pace while you are living within the faith." He was surely correct, but I still couldn't do it. So I had a problem, and I know others do also: how do we move ahead with our faith actions, when a significant barrier exists in our faith life? Giving up doesn't seem like an option.

When Tom Yorty asked me where that internal debate stands, I said I had a really original solution: I tried something called prayer! As in cartoons, a little light bulb had gone on above my head (you know - a bright idea), and the words in the little balloon said (in God's stentorian tones) "try prayer." I did - I prayed for a way out of this frustrating impasse. If it works, I thought, I'd get a solution AND a boost to my faith; if it doesn't seem to work, I'll be sadder but not defeated. Regarding prayer, the head of the

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English church said, half a century ago, I can't prove to you that prayer accomplishes anything. But, when I don't pray, the coincidences cease." I note that this sermon is NOT about my personal faith and struggles, but using a real example seems the best way to humbly pass on God's Word to be heard.

Shortly after that breakfast, the following coincidences occurred:

- Rev. Lance Brown (the guy in your bulletin insert) e-mailed a reply suggesting that I was stuck with old & restrictive ideas about God and Jesus, perhaps immature. To think in new ways, he mentioned a book: God: A Biography, which then provided significant help.
- I first saw a copy of the Butzer pamphlet (mentioned above) at the men's fall picnic at Tom Yorty's house. When I got my copy in December, I saw that it has some of the same God biography ideas I previously thought were heresies!
- if these sorts of coincidental overlaps aren't enough to get your attention, the Good Lord whacked me along the side of my head with a Harvard Divinity School magazine I had never read. I glanced at an article by a poet named Christian Wiman, who said "there is no sense arguing for God or belief to convince others, when we ourselves are not convinced. We can measure the value of our faith doubts by the disquiet they produce in us. Honest or devotional doubt is marked by humility, and mystery, and such doubt is painful." Yes it is, but fatal to our spiritual growth if we don't struggle with it, as Jerry Kelly and the audience did in the Case Library talk recently, contrasting Rick Warren with other pastors.

Call this doubting and growing process whatever you wish. But how liberating, to discover, *no, to be overwhelmed*, with informed reflections on the very issues that so plague some of us - that it's OK, and even desirable, to challenge the components of our faith that we personally cannot accept. The challenging does not lead to being chewed out by the pastor for unorthodoxy, or being shunned by the congregation. Instead, it seems to be the opposite: if we choose to ignore our intellectual or theological conflicts, our faith is compromised in proportion, resulting in a weaker belief - sort of like Popeye without the spinach!

A prayer Elena Delgado read to us 18 mos. ago seems to beautifully describe this challenge. It is attributed to Sir Francis Drake, and written in 1577, over 400 years ago, but more than 1500 years after the crucifixion. The prayer of Sir Francis:

Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess

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We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life.
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.

We ask you to push back
The horizons of our hopes
And to push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.

Sir Francis certainly believes that faith doubts left unexplored cause, at the least, a diminution of continued faith growth, whereas the risk in sailing further from shore is only a temporary fear, but results in finding the stars.

When it comes to faith, the challenges are not new, but we each have to grapple with them in our generation and in our own life, and seek answers that include our God, our fellow seekers, and our self.

Amen.