

Growing Into Our Faith

Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 20-25; Mark 12:28-34

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (Jan. 28) 2018

Baby Dedication of Leo Majs

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So much of what we do on Sunday mornings is much older than we are. The form of our service is centuries old, dating back nearly 2,500 years. We say the Lord's Prayer, along with Christians who have been saying it every Sunday morning for 2,000 years. The stole I wear goes back to Roman times and the pulpit robe stretches back to medieval times in northern Europe. Every Sunday we open and read and teach from this old book, the Bible, which has parts 3,000 years old, and we sing old hymns along with newer ones.

Part of this is to remind us that we are participating in something larger and older than ourselves. Faith is what I believe but it is also what *we* believe. Faith is inside of me but it is also outside of me. Our modern culture tends to be enamored with the new, the latest fad, and the new and the latest fad changes faster and faster. But here, in church, in worship we Christians look at the world with old eyes. John Henry Newman said, "Great acts take time." Ultimate truth, deep goodness, and great beauty cannot be cooked up over night and it doesn't materialize in our minds in a flash. "Deep convictions are not hazarded, but grown into slowly, obscurely and often painfully acquired," said theologian Nicholas Lash.

Part of what I want us to hear this morning is we can relax about our individual doubts and struggles with faith and belief. It is a heavy load to carry

when you worry over your doubts and what you don't believe. So hear me: relax. Quit worrying about them. The church knows what it believes even when you don't. The church is not threatened by doubt so it is not only okay to talk about what you don't believe; it is encouraged as part of the journey of faith. Doubt, struggle, not knowing for sure what you believe is part of what it means to have faith and grow in faith. We want you to be free to talk about them here.

Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said, "Those who say they believe in God, but believe without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even without despair, believe only in the idea of God, not in God himself."

In the mid-1950's student Alfred Corn, who later became a respected poet and writer, wrote a letter to Flannery O'Connor expressing his doubts about his faith. Flannery O'Connor wrote back to him saying, "To believe in God is not to avoid such doubts and difficulties but to undergo a lifelong combat with them. Faith is indeed a gift," she added, "but it is a gift that must be constantly cultivated and enlarged." She went on, "Faith grows and deepens through concrete acts of charity [and service]." She said, "Faith is still there, even when you can't see it or feel it, if you want it to be there... Learn what you can, but cultivate Christian skepticism. It will keep you free – not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect or the intellects of those around you."

We are here to be formed by that something larger than our own intellect or the intellects of those around us. This morning our readings are from the core of that larger tradition and larger intellect. Deuteronomy 6 is part of a series of

sayings attributed to Moses as a kind of farewell address to the people before he leaves them and they cross over to their new future on the other side of the Jordan River. The passage begins with what Judaism calls the “Shema.” The Shema is recited every morning and every evening at the beginning of prayers. The Shema is “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4). An interesting aside is that the first word is usually translated into English as “hear” but the rabbis across the centuries say it is better translated as “listen.” The first word in the prayer is “Listen! The Lord our God the Lord is One.”

This teaching, this prayer, at the very core of Judaism then says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (Deut. 6:5-7).

Later, down in verse 20 of chapter 6, it says, “When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of these commandments?’” Or “Why do we have to follow these commands?” It says to answer them with a story, *the* story, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...” (Deut. 6:20-22).

Notice part of what’s going on here. We are responsible for learning the core of our faith and reciting it. In other words, know it by heart. Know it in our hearts. Know it so it becomes who you are. Furthermore, we are to teach it to our children, so they too can recite it. And when they ask about it, we tell them the story.

There is a reason we teach our children and teach you to recite the Lord's Prayer. We do the Lord's Prayer much like the Shema.

In our reading this morning from the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus is asked what is the core of God's commandments? Matthew says the religious leaders were testing Jesus when they asked this, and Luke tells us that it was a young lawyer quizzing Jesus about eternal life and salvation. (It is interesting that in Luke, Jesus responds to the young lawyer's questions by telling a story: the Parable of the Good Samaritan). All – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – say that Jesus answered with these verses from Deuteronomy 6 about loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. This is what the Christian faith has come to call “the Great Commandment.” It is at the core of all we believe and practice.

But it is also true that these teachings are beyond us. We know that each and every one of us falls short of doing what Jesus, much less Moses, tells us to do. And there are times, when we are not so sure we even believe any of these teachings. We just don't know. Maybe we're not so sure about loving God or even if there is a God or not. Or perhaps we try to love God but not so much our neighbors – “My heavens, if you knew my neighbors!...”

There is much more I could say about all this, but for this morning, let's keep it to this. Don't give up. Don't give up believing and don't give up doubting. I encourage you to bring both your beliefs and your doubts here in worship and offer them to God. Also remember, as Flannery O'Connor told Alfred Corn, “Faith grows by concrete acts of charity and service.” In other words, faith must be practiced. We don't learn how to ride a bicycle by reading a book on bicycling and then thinking about whether or not we believe in it. We learn to ride a bicycle by

getting out and riding a bicycle. We grow into our faith by practicing loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. We might not understand it right now, but someday we will.

My old teacher Fred Craddock remembers a young woman telling him that when she was a freshman in college she was so discouraged. She was failing her classes, had not had a single date, didn't have as much money as many of the other students, and didn't know many people. "I was just so lonely and depressed and homesick and not succeeding. One Sunday afternoon," she said, "I went to the river near the campus and climbed up on the rail just looking into the dark water below and how inviting it was for me to simply drown my sorrows and drown myself. For some reason or another I thought of the line, 'Cast all your cares upon him for he cares for you.'" She said, "I stepped back, and here I am."

Dr. Craddock said, "Where did you learn that line?"

She said, "I don't know."

Fred said, "Do you go to church?"

"No, ... Well, when I visited my grandmother in the summers we went to Sunday School, church, and I attended vacation Bible school with her."

Dr. Craddock said, "Ah..."

So this morning, we keep praying, we keep singing, we keep reading and hearing Scripture. We keep teaching Bible verses and the Lord's Prayer to children, and we keep serving, we keep forgiving and being forgiven, and we keep loving. Sooner or later it'll fit. We'll grow into it. It'll make sense.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.