

Pentecost III, Proper 4 June 1, 2008

I'm going to begin with a grim little story, and, I hope, end up in a much better place. The story is a composite: Over the years, and for a number of different reasons, I have had occasion to talk with couples caught up in family violence. With that, there is a little scene, almost a set piece, that I have seen over and over, one that continues to haunt me, and to enrage me. I want you to imagine it with me.

The couple is sitting across from me, and they are nervous. She is sitting very straight and has on lots of make-up and maybe sunglasses to cover at least some of the black eye and the bruises. She positions herself as far across the couch from him as possible, and her eyes are jumpy. He, on the other hand, has a sort of please-love-me, hang-dog look, and he is full of remorse and regret; he has dressed up a bit and is sitting as close to her as she will let him. Then, a few minutes into our talk, the same thing always happens. Always, he turns to me with a heartfelt sigh, leans forward, and says "but I love my wife."

And there is something so very wrong, so terribly wrong with this claim, with this profession of love in the midst of such pain and abuse. What is wrong is not that there is all that love there and, tragically, he doesn't know how to show it—what is wrong is that there is no love here. There might be the dream of love, the hope of love and even the desire for love. (And these are not without value; and they can be a beginning.) But there is no love here because *love does not do this*.

It is a simple fact about real love that if you love someone there are some things that you do, and there are some things that you do not do. Otherwise, the word really doesn't mean a thing. Otherwise, what you have is not love, it is something else, and it is something far less. Otherwise, all of the impassioned protests to the contrary, it's time to go back to the very beginning, and make some basic decisions about how you are going to live, and what that is going to mean.

If this guy honestly wants to love his wife, then the way for him to begin doing that is not to concentrate really hard on deepening or clarifying his feelings; and the way to begin doing that is not to look within himself to discover what is missing, or what is wrong, or to relive his unfortunate past—although these, again, may help

If he wants honestly to love his wife, then the way for him to begin to do this is by changing his behavior; and by doing whatever it takes for that to happen. He has to stop doing what love does not do; and he has to start to do what love does. Remember, this is not a way for him better to *show* his love, this is a way for him to *have* some real love, love he can then begin to live out, to nurture, and to show.

This grim little scene is something to keep in mind whenever we hear Jesus say things like “Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven.” And it can help us make sense out of all the business in the New Testament, and in the church ever since, about justification and salvation and faith and works.

To begin with, there are some words that mean—at the same time—both stuff about what goes on inside of us, and stuff about what we do, what our behavior is. Love is one of those words; so is faith (and there are more). Faith is no more mainly about what you believe in your head than love is mainly about what you feel in your heart. Both of them are really and primarily about what you choose, and what you do.

If your behavior is really off the wall, then it doesn't really matter what's in your heart, love isn't there. In pretty much the same way, agreeing with all the right beliefs, and thinking that Jesus is just swell, and saying all the right things, even saying them over and over again—all by themselves, this is not faith.

It might be the dream for faith, the hope for faith, even the desire for faith (and these are not without value; and they can be a good beginning). But, all by itself, that right belief can be exactly the chanting of “Lord, Lord” that Jesus says can so easily miss the point.

Now I am not saying that somehow belief doesn’t really matter and that all that matters is that we do the right things, the right works—it’s way too easy for sermons like this to end up sounding like the worst possible reading of Flood story we just heard from Genesis—you gotta do exactly the right things, by the rules, or God will get you and everyone else in the world. That’s nonsense; we know better than that; and the flood story as a whole says just the opposite of this.

What I am trying to say is that God’s gift to us of faith, and God’s call to us to ever deepening and growing faith, this is a loving, and often a gentle, call that involves and moves every part of us, not just our minds and our hearts, but also our wills, our choices and our bodies. And if we stop short of all of that, then we have abandoned the best for the good, and we have impoverished ourselves.

Part of what that means is that, for many of us, much of the time, discovering faith and growing in faith does not mean *learning something more* about the Bible or about our traditions, or our history; and most of the time it is not about emotional experiences. You can’t learn your way into genuine Christian faith. You can learn your way *toward* faith, and with faith you soon discover that there is a whole lot to learn; just like some experiences can strengthen faith or even make it possible.

Instead, as a rule, you act and live and you love your way into true and deeper faith. That’s when you have something to learn about—that’s when the learning and the feelings can sink in; and make a difference.

So, for many of us, much of the time, growing in our faith really means deepening, not our religious knowledge, or our religious feelings, but our religious behavior. The call to faith we so often feel cannot be met fully without a commitment to action—first of all, perhaps, a commitment to stop doing those things which faith does not do; but also, and always, a commitment to doing the things faith that does.

A tug from God toward more, toward going deeper, may well a tug, not to feel something or to study something, but to *do* something. It may be a tug toward more regular and more disciplined prayer; or toward the sort of service that makes it easier to discover the face of Lord in the face of our neighbor; or toward a new understanding of stewardship; or toward a careful re-examining of what it means for your job, or your family, or your retirement, to be your primary baptismal ministry. As always, while we can help with this development, the details of such things you need to work out with God and, usually, another person. But it will probably be about doing something, and it is really never true that we don't know enough to do *something*.

Yesterday, Saint Nicholas' met with Angela Hock to look at ways that we can express, and make real, not only our commitment to our Lord and to our world, but also our commitment to who we are—to Saint Nicholas' Church as a place that has made a commitment to “reflect the love of Christ and to respect the dignity of all people.” We came up with some great ideas that can involve each of us over the months ahead; ideas that can move us forward—building on the wonderful foundation that has been established through such trials and joys, ideas that can bring us a bit closer to being that new thing that God is calling us to be. I am deeply proud of what Saint Nicholas' has done, and I am excited by what awaits us.

After all, what we choose and what we do are as much a part of the gift of faith as what we believe or how we feel. And while there are some things that faith, like love, just doesn't do; and there are some things it does.