

Depth of Faith

Now I'm not saying that church professionals need faith more than other folks do. But I'm tempted to. Nor is that what ELCA means when it says of "pastors and lay leaders" that what they need first of all is "depth of the faith." Who doesn't? Nobody's faith can afford to be skindeep. Still, when it comes to a faith which is rooted merely in our topsoil or in the tops of our heads, I do think we church professionals are particularly needy. Why? Not just because this is the season for celebrating the Reformation, when it took a priest to rediscover that our "first imperative" (shall we say) is sola fide, "altogether by faith." Not just because the Reformation epistle lesson next Sunday (Romans 3: 19-28) took a recovering pharisee to write it, who had learned the hard way that he had only one "boast": faith. Then why? Well, because church professionals, like Paul and Luther, tend to be particularly religious. And being religious, as Paul notes in this Romans text, makes it harder than ever if not impossible to have faith.

It is the best people, I suppose, who know best that they are not the best people. The better we become the better we realize that we are not better after all. But realizing that takes the enjoyment out of our betterment. Well, you say, that figures. If we truly are not better, then what's to enjoy? Anyway, isn't that only to be expected as part of growing up? As we mature morally and spiritually, we mature also in our self-honesty. We give up our childish, inflated illusions about ourselves. Gone is the juvenile gloating and swagger. Isn't that the mark of mature religion, to give all credit no longer to ourselves but now solely to God – soli Deo gloria, sola gratia?

Trouble is, as the gloating diminishes, so does our glowing, our radiance, our "glorying" (Paul's word), literally our glow-

rying. No longer can we glow-ry in how our lives impress God, knowing that they don't. No longer can we revel in how tickled God is with us. No longer can we bask in how our performance delights the Creator, because it doesn't. Gone are the gratifying divine compliments, gone the Creator's doting on our works and ways, which we so need in order to thrive. Gone is the rollicking, shrieking fun of "Mommy, daddy, watch me dive in without holding my nose." Still, isn't that what life is meant to be all about, being able to exult in how we thrill the fatherly-motherly Creator, and letting that show in how we glow? For good reason we can't do that anymore, seeing who we truly are. We know better now, thanks to the sobering truthfulness of our religion – what Paul calls "the law." Of course, we could always lie.

But that, too, is one of the very things we're trying to get better at, not lying. And as we succeed, we discover all over again how even that can be a form of kidding ourselves. Most seminarians have learned that much by their second year –that and the sobriety (really the cynicism) that comes with it.

The more religiously knowledgeable we are about ourselves, the more do we, as Paul says, "fall short of the glory of God." What that means, Luther perceived, is that we fall short of glorying in God. We have ceased glowing, adults that we now are. That happens routinely to folks who are conscientious, mature, truthful, self-aware – for instance, us clergy. When it comes to glorying in the divine favor, we fall flat on our faces, thanks to the crippling candor of our religiousness. The more religious we are, the more critically honest, but also the more we dance before the Holy of Holies like klutzes. Good dancers, like children, never watch their feet. Religion encourages watching your feet. And so we fall. There are whole cults among us who try pathetically to "feel good about ourselves," and grimly work at that new "work of the law," only to feel bad about that in

turn. About what? About the fact that trying so hard to feel good about ourselves somehow leaves us feeling worse, though we know we oughtn't. Still, honesty keeps breaking through. If that hasn't hit you by internship, you must be slow.

Frank Sinatra once said he was "in favor of anything that will get you through the night, whether it's booze or religion." We've got news for Old Blue Eyes: you're at best half right; don't count on religion. As with the law, so with religion, you cannot live without it but neither can you live with it. Nor were you meant to. But if it's all you have, it's a killer. What we are meant to be is plausible – literally, pleasing – and confident that we are plausible. That is what Paul calls faith: confidence that we have the Creator's applause. But no amount of religion will get you that – of course, neither will booze – unless, like booze, it lies to you. Moreover, if you don't believe God finds you plausible, so Luther discovered, God doesn't. That is why conscientious, religious, law-aware people like clergy are not good at believing. For good reason they're not. What makes the pastorate such a killer is not the hard work – which, as my mother taught me, never killed anyone – or the stress or even the conflict, but the religiousness of it all, "the law of God." And that law, with its mortifying truthfulness, is standard equipment, not optional.

The trick is, not to evade this killer and certainly not to deny it but, would you believe it, making the most of it, parlaying our dying into a cross, the Cross, and thus into resurrection. Wasn't it Cranmer who claimed that the one miracle which Christians can still perform is to convert any adversity into prosperity, to change sow's ears into silk purses? The other day a student of mine, J. Z. Haller, quoted her Jewish friend as saying, "You Christians treat death like a promotion." That must be what Cranmer had in mind. Dying, especially at the hands of the law, death by accusation, is for trusters just the

beginning. But that much it is, or can be. The mortification which is part of every religion or, in a secular age, the mortification which comes with our “culture of critique,” as Deborah Tannen calls it, can be one step toward our “justification.” True, that is also all it is, merely the initial phase. The trick is, as Paul says, not to die in our sin but to die out on it. Henry the Fourth was right, “We owe God a death.” But how to pay all we owe and still get it all back, and then some, to live off of? The answer to that nervy question –nervier than most parishioners would dare ask, even used car salesmen – is the answer for which the church trains pastors.

The answer comes in the crass and earthy terms our parishioners (for example, salespersons and street-people) might understand, “The redemption [of our debt] is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” Notice, the expiation is not presented to God but by God. Notice especially who the expiating One is, that most plausible Child who goes diving into death, our death, without holding his nose, suffering our doom and suffering it out of existence, all the while trusting his Parent “who judges justly” and is so manifestly “well pleased with him” as to raise him promptly from the dead. Clearly this Christ Jesus has grounds for glow-rying. And who of all people should know more about him, have more opportunity for knowing, than his messengers, the church’s professionals? As well they might, considering the special hazards they have to brave, being religious: the hazards of their own un-faith.

But it is exactly for their unfaith that Christ is the great antidote, he who “is received by faith.” He is received, notice, not by their religious exertions, not by their working feverishly to “feel good about themselves,” not by their trying to keep their eyes off their two left feet but, of all things, by their faith – which to all appearances is the most stumbling,

tenuous thing about them. Yet what is it he says about them, these oligopistoi, these “little-faiths?” “Oh man/oh woman, great is your faith.” “Your faith has made you well.” “Your faith has saved you.” “Our faith?” they gasp dumbfoundedly. “What’s so great about that?” they ask, these professionals who major in pious, unsparing self-critique.

After all, isn’t our faith, for all its fragility, just a subtle variation on our old “boasting,” not really all that different from that earlier, childish cockiness which the law of religion has been trying so hard to eradicate in us? Yes, psychologically, I suppose, there isn’t all that much difference between the old “boasting” and this apparently very similar boast called “faith.” The only difference we can see is what or whom the boasting is boasting in: formerly, our “works of the law,” now “Christ Jesus.” Exactly, says the gospel. That is indeed what makes all the difference. That is what suddenly gives our boasting class, validity, plausibility or, if you prefer, “righteousness,” namely, the plausible Child whom we count on instead as we go diving into our church vocations without holding our noses, “glow-rying” as we go. He is what makes our faith, even our poor faith, “great.” Talk about making a sow’s ear into a silk purse.

“The depth of the faith,” to quote the ELCA term, is what? It is not how deeply we trust or how profoundly we understand, though those are the things we work at, religiously. No, the depth of our faith is the One who works for us. The Depth of the faith is Christ, that plausible Child whom God put forward to be received by us, for our glory-ing. As if that weren’t enough, imagine, on top of that, being called to do that for a living. I might as well admit, brothers and sisters, it is wild, this churchly calling. Paul might have called it “hilarious,” something like bungee jumping. It is for that kind of Depth that believers fall, and ministers first of all. I would not advise your

falling for it unless you are prepared to commit Reformation.
And there's no telling where that will end. Or is there?

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