

Faith Place

Dear Folks, Below is a compilation of two pieces about Faith Place, the new mission that we're developing in the city of St. Louis. The first part is a theological reflection I wrote the day after Christ the King Sunday. The second and shorter part is a weblog entry I wrote the following week. Between the two I think you'll get a flavor for what's happening at Faith Place. If you want to contact us our email is faithplace@hotmail.com, the blog's address is www.faithplace.blogspot.com and our snail mail is P.O. Box 2008, St. Louis, MO 63158.

In the last month, so much has happened at Faith Place that I really can't give you a good description of our life together in a page or so. The kids' program has transmogrified a couple of times as we work to find the best way to do ministry with the neighborhood kids who've showed up at our door. Our first worship service was good, the second one was a disaster, the third was wonderful. Some kids are asking to be baptized, some are calling me names that I won't repeat here and sometimes it's the same kids doing both. The choir is singing, the choir is acting horribly, the choir is singing and leading worship. It's been a real roller coaster. Yesterday was Christ the King Sunday. I know some people do not believe that using this image is helpful in our world today. The triumphalistic, even militaristic overtones do nothing to further the cause of peace and justice where they are so desperately needed across the globe. But the image rang true for me yesterday as the devotion I was reading encouraged me to look, really look, at the scene between Pilate and Jesus. Pilate had the obvious authority in the situation: the one with the palace office, the armed guards, the empire's backing. Jesus was a king in chains.

Last week the St. Louis Post Dispatch ran a series of articles

about the Joyce Meyer ministries that are based in the St. Louis area. It's a multi-million dollar, international operation that reaches people all over the world with Joyce's down to earth preaching style that is based in "name it and claim it" theology. She's very up front about telling people how to live their lives being obedient to God. She says that if you're obedient to God's will, you will prosper. A triumphalistic Christ the King Sunday, although I don't think she's particularly liturgical, is probably right up her alley.

I've watched Joyce a few times and her preaching is appealing. She doesn't pull any punches and she's very honest about her own struggles and her past. The thing that really bothers me is what happens when you "name it and claim it" and it still doesn't come to pass (Just for the record, I was in a ministry, long ago and far away, that espoused this theology, so I know whereof I speak). What happens if you "name it and claim it", but it still doesn't come to pass? It's your fault, you weren't believing, you weren't being obedient somehow. That kind of theology is a house of cards that can collapse at any moment if one card gets pulled from its place. If everything depends on your believing, you lose everything when you discover that your believing doesn't always get the job done. In such a crisis moment, one temptation is to turn away from God in anger. The other temptation is to fall into despair because you couldn't believe.

In building this new ministry at the corner of Jefferson and Shenandoah, I would already be in a rage at God or the pit of despair if I thought that the whole ministry hinged on my believing. There is no blueprint for this work and it's a matter of trial and error over and over again as we reach out to the neighborhood. I see people being moved by the ministry, I see people clambering to get in the door when we're open, but the randomness of the situation does drive me to distraction

from time to time. Saturday I was bemoaning the fact that I can't find a "methodological foothold", some basic way of functioning that will be valid in all the different situations I encounter. I said to the person who was so graciously listening to me whine that everything we do feels like we're trying to walk in quicksand, where is the bedrock?

No doubt you've all picked up on my next thought before I did. It took me saying out loud, "Where is the rock I can stand on?" to bring me back to my King in chains. Ah yes, there He is, He's been here all along, I've just been too agitated to notice. It's not about me trusting that my believing will bring the circumstances into some harmonious alignment, but that as I trust Him, He gives me the strength, the joy and the peace, to continue following Him into circumstances that are often chaotic. Not all the situations in our lives can be solved by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, whether through hard work or believing. There are circumstances which we may never understand nor be able to affect the way we may have originally hoped to do, but He calls us to follow Him nonetheless.

An amazing reality I have come to experience in my own life these past few months that never stood out in such bold relief before, is that even in the midst of the pain of trying to find my way in the dark, there has been enormous joy. It's not the happiness of success per se, though we have had some amazing successes, too. It's that sense of being where I'm called to be and doing what I'm called to do, which carries me forward, following Him, regardless of where we're going.

Wednesday evening was wonderful. About thirty people were at the worship service, almost all Faith Place folks and we were in the new worship space. We've still got a lot of work to do to get the space the way we want it, but I think having a

permanent chapel is very important to our growth.

The three children who wanted to be baptized were present. Unfortunately, their older sister got sent home in the middle of the service because her behavior was so awful. Their mother did not show up even though she and I had talked the day before and I had specifically asked her to come for dinner/worship and even though they just live at the other end of the block.

Since I figured this might be the case, I revamped the baptismal service a bit. I excluded the parts about parents' and sponsors' responsibilities and highlighted the reality that these young people are being brought into the community. In fact, I started a new tradition, at least for Faith Place, called Hands of Peace. After baptizing each of them and us all clapping to acknowledge their inclusion into the community, we all gathered around them and laid "hands of peace" on them while I prayed about the significance of this change in their lives individually and our lives collectively as a community. We gave them each a cross and a children's Bible that had been inscribed.

Though we all know that baptism is about what God through Christ did for us, not what we do ourselves, I have the feeling that this event will have an impact on them on a day to day level. They belong now. They have a place where they are welcomed and treated with respect. I don't know what kind of outcome this will have for Faith Place, but I think it will be significant.

One of the girls who was baptized came up to me before the service and gave me an artificial rose she must have gotten at the convenience store. It is a single pink rose bud with a little teddy bear attached to the stem. One of the other staff members said that I should have seen my face. She also said

that I was getting through to these kids more than I realize in the midst of all the chaos. As you can imagine, I was really touched.

It's been a good Thanksgiving weekend. God is abundantly blessing this ministry.

Because of the King in Chains,
Robin Morgan