

What's in a Name?

We're starting a new ministry in the city of St. Louis. It's the first new Lutheran (any flavor Lutheran) ministry in the city in over 50 years. The neighborhood architecture screams working class German, but the faces on the street belie that masonry evidence. The name of the ministry is Faith Place.

I'd like to say that the name was inspired, maybe even transcendent somehow – written across the sky in purple neon. But in reality it was the name that no one in our organizing group (local lay leaders and clergy) objected to. After all the brainstorming and arguing, Faith Place was our default name.

In these first months of on-site work, I'm starting to think that maybe in the midst of our arguing there was inspiration. Especially after I found this definition of faith: "Faith is nothing else than longing for mercy."

Longing for mercy is such a universal human need. Anyone who's lived long enough to have fallen headlong over their youthful arrogance knows this longing. We want a place that's judgment-free. We need someone who knows exactly who we are and yet still looks at us with open, warm, loving eyes. We crave a place where we can live in peace without reprisal. Who isn't looking for that?

Unfortunately, faith is also a word like grace and spirituality that's been absorbed into various parts of our culture much to its detriment. Like the crosses that hang around the necks of fashionable young women and men who have little concern for its symbolism, the word faith has become devoid of much meaning in many places.

Yet thinking of faith as nothing else than longing for mercy

gives us two marvelous places to start when talking with anyone about the subject. As I said before, longing for a place/a relationship where forgiveness is key, opens a multitude of doors for conversation. From the individual who can't forgive their abuser, to the person who knows that their crimes are beyond hope of forgiveness, to the middle manager who is measured day after day by some corporate yardstick, speaking in terms of longing for mercy can be a powerful way to carry our words into deep and meaningful places.

Secondly, "faith as nothing else than longing for mercy" sets in bold relief what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. From such a universal human need without any merit on our part, God changed the course of our lives through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Longing for mercy isn't much of a "work." I don't see how you can squeeze much self righteousness out of such a need and yet it is how God makes us whole. When we turn to Jesus with this longing, God moves heaven and earth on our behalf.

When I started thinking about this definition of faith, I looked up mercy in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church and was directed to "corporal works of" and "spiritual works of." The dictionary said that traditionally, the corporal works of mercy are 1) feeding the hungry, 2) giving drink to the thirsty, 3) clothing the naked, 4) harboring the stranger, 5) visiting the sick, 6) ministering to prisoners, 7) burying the dead. The traditional spiritual works of mercy are 1) converting the sinner, 2) instructing the ignorant, 3) counseling the doubtful, 4) comforting the sorrowful, 5) bearing wrongs patiently, 6) forgiving injuries, 7) praying for the living and the dead.

I'm not sure I'd phrase some of the works quite that way. But I am sure that I see the results of having that longing for mercy satisfied by Jesus in the lives of many of our Faith Place

volunteers. Their longing for mercy is transformed into a longing to offer to others that same mercy they've received. It's not about earning their way into heaven or following some set of rules that has been handed down for generations. It's about wanting to, needing to give what they've first been given.

People walking the streets of a city neighborhood talking to strangers about their faith, inviting them to come and be part of this new ministry that's being born in the community. People with important jobs in the metro area sitting on kindergarten chairs washing Legos in disinfectant so area children have a safe and nurturing environment for the after school program. People committing to responsibilities to help this new ministry get established that go beyond their own personal needs and their home parish responsibilities. That's faith in action.

It's amazing to me to see how God takes something so simple, so universally human and embedded in our fallen-ness as our longing for mercy and through it makes us new people, both individually and collectively, so that we can help bring wholeness to the world.

Faith Place is the right name for this new ministry.

Robin Morgan

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PS – For those of you wondering where I got that definition (is it really Lutheran?) look on page 369 of C. F. W. Walther's "The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel."