

Faith: What Would Jesus Think?
Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009

PART I

By The Rev. Karen Gustafson

Some years ago, now, I was having lunch with my then eight-year-old daughter, Sarah, in a restaurant themed with the Arthurian Legend. The menu cover had many tales associated with the time of the Knights of the Round Table including a brief explanation about the demise of the unicorn. According to legend, there are no unicorns on earth today because when Noah was loading up the ark, the unicorns were cavorting elsewhere and missed the boat.

"Do you think that's true?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "What do you think?"

She was enrolled at that time in the Episcopal church Sunday school where her father was a member and she answered, "Well, the Ark is in the Bible and what the Bible says is true."

"Okay," I prompted.

"But I don't believe everything in the Bible," she went on.

"Really," I said, "Like what don't you believe?"

"Well," she said, "like the part about God being Jesus' father. I don't believe that."

"Really!" I said.

"I mean, Joseph was Mary's husband, right?"

"Right."

"So, wouldn't that make Joseph Jesus' father?"

"You'd think so," I said. And then "What do you think about us all being God's children?"

"Oh," she said, "I believe that. I just think Joseph was Jesus' father."

Far be it from me to argue with that logic. I did wonder how her Sunday school teacher was faring with Sarah's emerging struggle between reason and faith. I could only imagine her in a few months coming up against the Easter story and her deepening incredulity.

Marcus Borg in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the Very First Time* writes, "...The story is very hard to believe. The notion that God's only son came to this planet to offer his life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that God could not forgive us without that having happened, and that we are saved by believing this story, is simply incredible. Taken literally it is a profound

obstacle to accepting the Christian message. To many people it simply makes no sense."

And, I dare say, this was not lost on this precocious eight-year-old.

The Gospel of Luke, Chapter 18 verses 15-17, offers the following account of Jesus himself:

People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

2000 years later here was a little child seeking an authentic relationship with this Jesus, wanting for him to be more like a man and less like a God. Surely the children who came to him had among them those who, like himself, were willing to challenge authority and engage in the act of questioning so central to the Jewish tradition. How might Jesus himself respond to Sarah's questions of history and faith?

I think first we need to decide which Jesus.

Marcus Borg makes the distinction of the pre-Easter and the post-Easter Jesus. John Haynes Holmes, in this morning's reading names these two conceptions "the Jesus of dogma and the Jesus of history".

To which of these figures would the child in any of us be more likely to address our questions of faith?

Is it the Jesus celebrated in the ultimate drama of the resurrection, larger than life, heralded in the Easter hymn of so many childhoods, "Up from the grave he arose with a mighty triumph o'er his foes. He arose a victor from the dark domain and he lives forever with his saints to reign..."

Or is it Jesus, the young carpenter moving among the people teaching compassion and peace and forgiveness and brotherhood and love of neighbor. Though sometimes deemphasized in the central imagery and mythology of Christianity, the image of this wise and gentle man, champion of the outcast and the down trodden, is embedded in the parables and teachings which most readily apply to human life.

By all accounts, Jesus was a person, spiritually evolved and in touch with the power which he clearly understood to be God; he was a teacher of wisdom; he was a social prophet; he was a movement founder, challenging and shattering the boundaries of his Day. But, according to Marcus Borg:

His own self understanding did not include thinking and speaking of himself as the Son of God whose historical

intention or purpose was to die for the sins of the world, and his message was not about believing in him. Rather, he was a founder who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same spirit that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision was shaped by the core value of compassion.

According to Elaine Pagels, the "living Jesus" spoken of in the Gnostic Gospels speaks, "of illusion and enlightenment, not of sin and repentance, like the Jesus of the New Testament. Instead of coming to save us from sin, he comes as a guide to open spiritual understanding. "

In this interpretation of the nature of Jesus, we see him not as God but as one who challenges us to cultivate, in the words of liberal theologian Henry Nelson Weiman, "the divine seed" that dwells within each of us.

If it is the Jesus of history to which we address our questions of faith, I can only imagine that he would be aghast at the history spawned in the wake of his life.

He would speak with compassion toward all of those for whom belief in his divinity has been a path away from fear and oppression.

He would speak out in anger toward the idolatry of those who have used his image as a way of eliciting fear of damnation and guilt and shame for lapses in their path toward wholeness, and in horror at the bloodshed and violence perpetrated in his name.

He might speak out in protest of his distorted celebrity status and question the images that portray him, not as a teacher, but as a victim, a human sacrifice, not one redeemed by good works and the power of right relationship with all of life but through divine intervention.

He might well speak with pain and sadness about the ways in which Christianity wrested him from his Jewishness, claiming his teachings, denying that the fundamental ways in which what he taught and what he lived were grounded in his own Jewish tradition.

He would undoubtedly deny his Virgin birth as well as his resurrection as the historical conceits they were, used by the purveyor of dogma to separate him from the very people whom he sought to empower.

I imagine he would affirm Sarah as a thinking, questioning person like himself and encourage her to look for the ways in which she might expand upon the possibility that she and each child have which is the capacity to be expressions of love and compassion. That faith is not about believing in his sacrificial suffering and resurrection,

but about trust in the power of love and compassion and forgiveness; the Christians got it right when they tied the idea of resurrection to forgiveness, but the true resurrection shows itself in our own capacity to forgive one another again and again, lifting us to a place of love and compassion in ways wholly miraculous and mysterious.

PART 11

By the Rev. Dr. Michael A. Schuler

In tracing her own spiritual journey, writer Anne Lamott tells of a class she took as a college sophomore in which students were assigned to read *Fear and Trembling* by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. The author's analysis of the Old Testament story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Isaac, "changed my life forever" Lamott writes.

Despite having been raised in a secular household as a young adult Lamott developed a taste for spiritual literature, and a deep hunger for spiritual experience. She immersed herself in the writings of Rumi, Thomas Merton, Simon Weil and William Blake, and would retreat to the campus chapel fitfully to pray. But Kierkegaard broke open something inside her. "It made no sense that Abraham was willing to do the one thing in the world he could not do" - sacrifice his one and only son - "just because God told him to," Lamott mused.

God told him to obey and to believe that he was a loving God and could be trusted. So Abraham did obey... I left that class believing - accepting that there was a God. I did not understand how this could have happened. It made no sense...but somehow I crossed over... I made, if not exactly a leap of faith, a lurch of faith.

"It made no sense" Lamott concedes, and that is a theme that recurs in the testimony of many who have tried to account for faith. Thus, the unknown author of the New Testament book of Hebrews describes it as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." He then provides multiple examples of heroic figures who acted out of faith rather than their own considered and cautious judgment. Noah constructed his ark; Abraham sojourned far from his homeland; Moses defied the powerful pharaoh. None of these actions were justified by the available evidence; none "made sense" in conventional terms. Nevertheless,

each of these individuals became firmly convinced that the path they had chosen was the proper one.

The faith of a Moses or a Mary Magdalene may not be antithetical to reason but in many instances it does seem to confound or transcend reason. It does little good to argue with it because it employs a different logic from that which generally informs our behavior. Faith doesn't play the odds or demand hard, unimpeachable evidence. Like love, it doesn't lend itself to close analysis or clear explication. Those who, like H.L. Mencken, feel that a person's beliefs and behavior should always stand up to rational inspection may be quite intolerant of faith. "It may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable," he scoffed.

But such a glib, dismissive comment confuses faith with mere wishful thinking or intellectual obtuseness and doesn't do it justice. The fact is, professions of faith are often made by people who know very well what the score is. Without discounting the evidence or minimizing the risks, they make a leap, or a "lurch" of faith anyway. "It is the heart that experiences God and not the reason," Blaise Pascal wrote. "This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not reason."

In discussing the relationship of faith and reason a week ago, I argued that the former is more closely related to "trust" than to "belief." In other words, faith is not the uncritical assent a person gives to creeds, dogmas and other intellectual propositions. It is, rather, the trust they feel for something that supports their values, provides genuine spiritual sustenance and is a cause for hope.

In Hebrew, faith implies a heart-felt investment in what is ultimately "valid, assured and reliable," Gunther Bornkamm tells us. Similarly, the ancient Greek term *pistos* connotes trustworthiness, something that can be relied upon. These terms have "nothing in common with vague...hopes or general convictions," he declares. They are really all about trust.

Now, Jesus invoked that word repeatedly. Without advancing a doctrine, invoking a creed or testing his listeners on their beliefs, he simply invites them to enter into a trusting relationship with a God he himself has experienced as gracious, forgiving, accessible and liberating.

Jesus appeared on the scene at a very tumultuous time in history. Palestine was chafing under Roman occupation and the despotic rule of the puppet king, Herod Antipas.

Civil strife, religious rivalry and economic inequality were cruel facts of life. Itinerant prophets, teachers and healers, Jesus among them, offered their services to an increasingly disconsolate population.

Jesus was hardly the only person who exhibited unusual powers in ancient Israel. Biblical scholar Bruce Chilton says that the *Chasid* were a class of rabbis who had acquired the ability to "channel the energy of God." They were ancient Judaism's shamans or "faith healers." What made Jesus unusual was his conviction that these gifts signaled God's intention imminently to redeem Israel.

According to any number of scholars, Jesus believed wholeheartedly that the present, corrupt age was rapidly drawing to a close, to be followed by a new Eden in which the forces of evil - death, disease, violence, inequality and injustice - would all be eliminated. As the harbinger of this divinely-directed development, Jesus urged his followers to reject conventional wisdom and adopt the attitude that with God all things are possible. Participate in and be empowered by that vision, he encouraged, and you will literally be able to move mountains.

Jesus' own actions were meant to capture people's attention, to demonstrate that something powerful had been set in motion. Healings, exorcisms, welcoming sinners and those who were deemed unclean into table fellowship, voluntary poverty - these were all meant to demonstrate what faith demanded and what it might accomplish. Jesus doesn't ever really discuss faith, Kathleen Norris comments, he merely points to people upon whom it has had a transformative effect.

Nevertheless, he had a great deal of trouble convincing his audiences. Reports of 5 and 10 thousand coming out to hear him are almost certainly the product of the mystique that grew up around Jesus after his death. More typically, the Gospels indicate that his message was often summarily rejected by listeners. His family questioned his sanity and Jesus enjoyed little credibility in the towns and villages of his native Galilee. The indifferent or even hostile reaction he received is probably what prompted him to complain that "although the foxes have their dens and the birds their nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

This being the case, he repeatedly had to ask his vacillating followers to be patient and to trust in the God he had sworn to serve and in the promise of His Kingdom. Over and over Jesus employed the same argument, invoked the

same metaphor: from small and humble beginnings, great changes will eventually come about.

Consider a mustard seed, or to a bit of yeast, he taught. From that tiny seed, a great plant eventually will grow. And a few grains of yeast will prove sufficient to leaven several loaves. Likewise, he suggested, a great power is working in and through me, and if enough people trustingly allow it to work through them, the Kingdom will come into being.

It is in this context, Bart Ehrman says, that we should read that report of Jesus walking on the water. Though undoubtedly a myth, the episode points to a larger truth about the fruits of faith. What manner of man is Jesus? "He is the one who rises above it all," Ehrman explains,

...who can face the winds and master the waves, who can conquer all fear, dispel all doubt, overcome all suffering. He is the one we should follow. For if we do, we too can rise above it all and walk on the stormy sea of life, unbuffeted by the winds and unhampered by the waves.

This improbable story is not about something that actually *happened*, Ehrman maintains. It's about what can and does *happen* for those who are willing to take the risk of trusting.

The French writer Gustave Flaubert once equated "burning faith, the faith that works miracles" with fanaticism. When I first encountered that statement it struck me as extreme, but I think he may have been on to something. Jesus was totally invested in his mission, unwavering about his calling even to the point of death. He was "marked by intense and adamant devotion," which is one definition of a "fanatic."

Fanaticism is by no means limited to inquisitors, crusaders and totalitarian dictators - perpetrators of tremendous harm. Intense, unwavering devotion was a trait Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Susan B. Anthony also possessed and it made each of them formidable. "Nothing great is ever done without fanaticism," Flaubert insisted.

Nevertheless, unless accompanied by serious reflection we are much more likely to make a poor investment of faith, giving our hearts to undeserving persons and causes. The Gospels contain a powerful and relevant message about faith, but it needs to be complemented by thoughtful

consideration of the means to be utilized and the ends to be sought.

Faith is ultimately a matter of the heart and the head working in tandem, as allies rather than antagonists, for a brighter future. One would hope that, were he around today, Jesus would agree.