

What Matters

There's no doubt that much of our faith can be confusing, difficult, esoteric and contentious.

We have Christians of every stripe and belief, ranging from the conservative evangelicals who insist that dinosaurs and people roamed the earth together (because, they argue, the earth is less than 5000 years old) to the Amish who live among us but not with us, to the broad tents of the Episcopal Church that seeks ever more inclusion while our Roman Catholic friends have entered into a period of exclusiveness.

Just last week on one of the evangelical radio stations, I listened to two pastors doing their best to debunk carbon dating: a process used to date ancient bones and plant life.

These pastors told how some fundamentalist scientists (is that a contradiction in terms?) put silica on some recent bones, and sent them to be carbon dated.

Silica, the pastors said, can corrupt accurate carbon dating.

They didn't tell the lab that got the bones about the silica corruption; and they laughed for days when the carbon dating came back indicating these new bones were much older than they actually were.

"See that, carbon dating doesn't work!" they laughed.

On the other hand, the genius of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein, says:

"The human mind is not capable of grasping the Universe. We are like a little child entering a huge library. The walls are covered to the ceilings with books in many different tongues. The child knows

that someone must have written these books. It does not know who or how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. But the child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books—a mysterious order which it does not comprehend, but only dimly suspects.”

It's not only whether Christianity is compatible with science that causes a stir among many folks; but the intricacies of our own theology can sometimes send your head spinning.

For example, when I sat for the General Ordination Exam in 2006, a four day test which one must pass if one hopes to be ordained (listen up Steve!), the very first question on the very first day, was this:

“At the First Council of Constantinople, a movement led by Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus, among others, resulted in the declaration of the Full Divinity of the Holy Spirit and the adoption of the third paragraph of the "Nicene" Creed. In a three page essay:

1. Describe the theological issues concerning the Spirit's divinity at the time of the First Council of Constantinople, the extent to which they were resolved, and how.
2. Identify the ongoing theological implications of the First Council of Constantinople for contemporary pneumatology.
3. Include in your answer appropriate consideration of the doctrine of divine providence.”

After picking myself up from the floor, and wondering whether pneumatology was a new form of the flu, I made my feeble attempt to answer these questions....

Perhaps because we are so often in the midst of these many trees, today's gospel brings us to a high place where we can

look down and see, for a time at least, not just more trees, but the forest itself.

Like us, the Jewish people had a knack for complicating matters of faith: probably because it's so much easier to debate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin than it is to love.

So today, scripture reminds us yet again of what is essential in our faith.

And there is no better day for this reminder than on the day we remember all of the saints.

What is at the heart of our faith is simply this: it is love.

And it is this about love: We can love only because we are first loved by the God who, according to the wonderful imagination of the author of Genesis, takes some clay, molds it, and breathes the breath of life into it, and here we are; creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

It is God who initiates creation; and it is God, always and everywhere, who initiates love.

Love doesn't start with us, it doesn't originate with us, it doesn't even depend on us.

Love is, from the very start, a gift to us.

We live in times where it seems everything is up to us, and you don't have to look far to see people crushed under the burden of that false understanding of reality.

Just tune in to Joel Olsteen any evening and you'll hear all about how, if you just make a better you, then your life will be peaches!

The Bill Murray movie of a few years back, Ground Hog Day, makes the same point.

There's Bill Murray, a cynical, angry weatherman, who is on the world's worst assignment: hanging around a cold, overcast Pennsylvania podunk town waiting to see if a groundhog will see its shadow.

He goes to bed that night and wakes up to Sonny and Cher's nasally "I got you babe," and goes through his day as a grouch and a creep.

The next morning, same song, same day, same people, same grouch.

Day in and day out he relives the same experiences; and even when he tries to commit suicide or crimes, he still wakes up to the same day; ready to be rerun again and again.

It's only when he starts shaping up, being kind to people, noticing people, that he finally wakes up out of the hell of repetition.....a Joel Olsteen success story if there ever was one!

The only problem with Mr. Olsteen and that movie is that self-improvement directed by yours truly is not the Christianity of the Hebrew Bible or of the Christian Bible.

And that's what Jesus is calling us in close to see.

Love doesn't begin with us, it doesn't end with us.

Love begins and ends with God; and long before we can ever be givers of love, we are first and foremost its recipients, because while we often think that it is we who are pursuing God, the whole story of salvation, from Genesis to Revelation and everything in between, is pointing and shouting and cajoling us to open our eyes and see that it is always and everywhere God who is pursuing us.

And that pursuit depends not on having the answer to tricky questions or being sure about the mysteries of our faith: that pursuit by God is the very nature of God's relationship with us.

From the Israelites being freed from slavery in Egypt to God sending prophets and holy women to his people, calling them home, to the angel visiting Mary, to the incarnation of God in Jesus, to the gift at Pentecost of the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit that is alive and moving and transforming the world even today: the whole story of salvation is that of God seeking us out; and not us seeking God.

Most of you know that this summer I'll be traveling to Kenya for a sabbatical.

A priest many years ago spent years with the Masai, a herding people who travel between Kenya and Tanzania.

That priest travelled with and among the Masai tribes and he recounts the night when the elder he became friends with discovered that he himself was being pursued by God.

It began as a conversation about the word "belief."

The elder said that the Swahili word chosen by the priest was the wrong word.

The word in Swahili means literally "to agree to."

The elder said to the priest that “‘to believe’ like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance.

Only his eyes and his fingers took part in the act.

Instead, the elder continued, for a man really to believe is like a lion going after its prey.

His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey.

His legs give him the speed to catch it.

All the power in his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to the neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills.

As the animal goes down, the lion envelopes it in his arms, pulls it to himself, and makes it part of himself.

This is the way a lion kills.

This is the way a man believes.

This is what faith is.

The priest looked at the elder in amazement.

But the old man was not finished yet.

We did not search you out, Father, he said to the priest.

We did not even want you to come to us.

You followed us away from your house into the bush, into the plains, into the steppes where our cattle are.

You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and our people to find him.

But we have not done this.

We have not left our land.

We have not searched for him.

He has searched for us.

He has searched us out and found us.

All the time, we think we are the lion.

In the end, the lion is God." V. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 48.

What is the heart of our faith?

It is simply this: that before we were, God is; and because God is, you are loved; now and forever and ever, amen.

