

## Faith and Synthetic Faiths

James 2:14-19

(Second Sunday in Lent – February 17, 2008)

During this Lenten season I would like to direct our focus around the topic of “Faith in a Secular Culture;” what it means to be faithful Christian in a culture that doesn’t necessarily use a religious frame of reference, where spirituality for many takes precedence over any institutional forms like the church, where individuality (doing our own thing) takes precedence over mutuality or community. This morning I’d like to look at “Faith and Synthetic Faiths.”

Not often, but from time to time a total stranger will make an appointment to see me for a reason that I find unsettling. After introducing himself or herself, the person will explain that this is a little uncomfortable since he or she isn’t a part of any church and has never felt much need for or interest in religious matters. Now though, he goes on, everything has gone wrong and matters are worsening by the day. He says that he has tried everything he can think of to get life back in order but nothing helps. He’s desperate. The bottom line (and the reason for making the appointment with me) goes something like this: “So I’ve decided that maybe what I need is a religion.” It is said with all of the grim resignation with which a person might also say, “I’ve had to face up to the fact that I’m going to have to get glasses (or wear arch-supports or dentures or carry a cane or use crutches or buy a hearing aid). All pride has been swallowed in the feeling that now there is so little to lose that it might even be worth this visit to a minister to hopes of hooking up with some divine help.

To me it echoes that old story about the man who, while mountain climbing alone, lost his footing and slid to the very edge of a rock overhang, managing only a tenuous handhold to keep from plunging hundreds of feet to his death. Quite unable to climb back he hung there yelling for help, but to no avail. Finally, although not a religious person, he began to pray, “O God, I know that I may have ignored you. I know that I haven’t been a very moral person and that I haven’t earned your help. But if you get me out of this, I promise henceforth to be devout, moral, generous, faithful, caring and,” at which point he interrupted himself. He listened for a second and then said, “Never mind, God. Scratch all that. I just heard voices. A search party is on the way.”

I don’t find anything gratifying about any person driven in blind desperation to “try religion” as some kind of last resort. To the contrary, it’s frightening to me because of what is that person’s sheer vulnerability to quackery when he starts looking for a quick religious “fix” for

his problems or pain. In addition to whatever else has gone wrong in his life, he may well now also become a victim of exploitation and manipulation by any of many religious charlatans.

And it's not only worrisome, it's also depressing. It's depressing because it's one more reminder of the all-too-common "spare-tire" impression of what faith is. Your car's spare tire, as you know, doesn't cost much to carry around with you. Other than a very occasional look at it, it is "out-of-mind" most of the time. It will only be brought forth for very short intervals and quickly put out of sight again. It's easily hidden underneath a lot of other baggage. Nevertheless, one feels better knowing that there is one, even if he doesn't know how to access it.

"Spare-tire" religiousness, of course, doesn't bear the slightest resemblance to what faith is and what it has to do with a person's life. No, it's one of several common trivializations of the spiritual dimension of us, and, unfortunately, isn't the only one. Just that is what I would like to try to sort out with you for a few moments: what we mean and what we do NOT mean when we speak of faith.

The most common confusion in this area is the confusion between faith and belief. While faith and belief are definitely related, they are by no means the same thing. One can be an avid believer and still be shallow, self-absorbed, and amoral. The writer, philosopher and researcher, William James, after decades of studying human religious behavior said, "People will believe anything and would believe everything if they only could." Yes! Put simply, "beliefs are a dime a dozen" and some people put them on and take them off as they might a hat or a sweater. As the writer of our scripture lesson puts it, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe -- and shudder." That Christian faith is about belief is a rather odd notion, when you think about it. It suggests that what God really cares about is the beliefs in our heads – as if believing the right things is what God is most looking for, as if having "correct beliefs" is what will save us. And if you have "incorrect beliefs" you may be in trouble. But we need to realize that you can believe all the right things and still be in bondage.

So while one's beliefs definitely can express one's faith and spirituality, they can just as easily be no more than the shallowest, most random dabblings of thought. In fact, as you may have observed, it's sometimes the person with the least intellectual integrity and/or the least depth for whom beliefs come most easily. "Just tell me what to believe. No problem; I'll believe it; the tooth fairy, the number seven, the blarney stone, oat bran, a weather predicting ground hog or wooly-bear caterpillar, channeling, fortune cookies, crystals, coins in the

fountain, Jesus, God, Buddha, bio-rhythms, the Ouija board.” Without even straining hard, some seem able to cram much or most of that into their bag of beliefs. Maybe the hope is that more dogmas, doctrines and theories a person can swallow, the more spiritual it indicates that she is. That’s not true and it’s not faith. One’s faith is seen in what he’s moved to do and become, not in what he’s able to browbeat himself into thinking.

Faith is also not a way of making an end run around what’s real – isn’t the kind of wish-magic, for example, in which, by closing your eyes, gritting your teeth, and praying something as hard as you can, you might be able to suspend reality or reverse some law of the universe or cause to be true what’s not true.

A favorite story of mine involves the Roman Catholic missionary who, many years ago, encountered a Hindu man one day. After spending an hour or so explaining the wonders of Christianity and Catholicism to him, he persuaded the man to let him baptize him into the Christian faith. The Hindu finally agreed. The priest finished the rite of baptism saying, “And now, O God, in word and in water you have transformed this man from a Hindu into a Catholic. So be it!”

The next day – a Friday – he found his convert dining on some cooked rabbit. Since this was back when Catholics didn’t eat meat on Fridays, he scolded the man, reminding him that even as a Catholic, fish was the only acceptable meat on this day. But the man replied, “It’s okay. As soon as I caught the rabbit, before killing it, I baptized it and prayed, ‘And now, O God, by word and by water you have transformed this creature from a rabbit into a fish, and so be it!’”

The convert obviously saw his new belief as providing him with a whole bag of religious tricks for altering reality. Obviously faith has nothing to do with that sort of attempt to manipulate one’s world (though some keep hoping that they can make it work that way).

Also, faith isn’t at all to be confused with “fatalism,” with passivity, with the pious helplessness that sometimes masquerades as being devout. “It was meant to be,” and “Whatever will be will be,” “Que sera, sera”, a belief in predestination and in foregone conclusions, rather than proving one’s faith, is more often only a pseudo-religious way of excusing and exempting oneself from having to care, from forming demanding intentions, from maintaining intelligent hopes and from using one’s own personal power to affect what happens. The mother of that “I-just-leave-everything-to-God” sort of thing had to be the woman reported in the news some time ago, who, after a serious one-car accident, told officers that once the car had begun to skid sideways, she had just thrown up her hands and

said, “God, you take the wheel.” It’s merely a dippy superstition that hopes that if I make myself totally helpless, defenseless and devoid of will, then God is obligated to come to the rescue. That’s fantasy, not faith.

But if then, faith isn’t really a psychological spare tire or a shortcut means of avoiding trouble and pain or an anesthetic or a holy kind of magic or a capsule of beliefs one must swallow in order to stay on God’s good side, how should faith in God be thought of? What role does it play in life? What difference should it make in us or for us?

It’s actually closer to being a set of presuppositions with which you approach your living – is that which keeps you caring, moved, excited and hopeful. There are many analogies that hint of it. One, which I have used before, tells of a piano in which five mice were born. There in the piano, they were, of course, surrounded by wonderful harmonies. Being scientific mice, they investigated their surroundings and soon observed that the remarkable sounds came when wires vibrated as they were struck by hammers. So, it was all a happy accident and “Wasn’t it fortunate that it happened to work that way for them?” But then one day one of the five tripped and fell through an opening, landing outside the piano. As he recovered from the shock of the fall, he realized that he was looking at a person sitting on a bench, deliberately pushing keys that caused the hammers to strike the wires, resulting in the wonderful harmonies.

This changed everything. He hurried back to the inside of the piano with great excitement to tell his mouse brothers. They laughed – ridiculed his story, told him that it was completely preposterous. They suggested that whatever fall he had taken had damaged his mind. For after all, they had all seen the hammers striking the wires, hadn’t they? Why would any mouse in his right mind complicate things by coming to believe that there was some larger presence, purpose, process, or intention behind the harmonies that swirled around them? It was much easier on them to believe that there was no meaning beyond what they had determined that there was.

The story hints at what is the legitimate link between faith and belief. It’s not at all belief in the sense of making up one’s mind once and for all just how everything is. No. This is a much more humble type of believing – a kind of trusting that there’s always more going on than I know, a belief that whether I understand it or not, there is a yet more profound process, a still larger intention at work in us and around us. In the case of Christians, it is “belief” in the sense of staying open to the possibility that the God of creation actually works, speaks and acts through you and me something like that which we saw lived and revealed in Jesus.

**“Faith” like this, by the way, isn’t exclusive to Christians. Etty Hillesmun, a Dutch, Jewish woman was in her twenties when the Nazis began terrorizing the Jews of Holland. She managed to keep writing diaries and letters during those black days of hardship and persecution -- ones that survived and that reverberate of the sense of calling and of purpose that kept her moving, growing and inspired despite the horrible circumstances of her living. In one passage she wrote, “I only want to be true to that in me that seeks to fulfill its promise. I think I have matured enough to assume my “destiny,” to cease living an accidental life. It is no longer a romantic dream or the thirst for adventure or of love – all of which can drive you to commit mad and irresponsible acts. No, it is a terrible, sacred, inner seriousness, difficult and at the same time inevitable.”**

**As perhaps you could hear, that wasn’t about some teeth-gritting belief that God just HAD TO soon reverse her circumstances, that divine vindication was on the way, or even that a glorious outcome to her suffering was assured her. What Etty Hillesmun believed was that no matter what happened or how things appeared, as long as she was able to draw breath, with God’s help, she would still have gifts to give, would have truth to stand for, and would herself be a creator of meaning.**

**That’s where the difference gets made. Once again, faith has very little to do with whether or not someone can make himself believe in the doctrine of the trinity, or in the virgin birth or in reported miracles or in someone’s picture of heaven and hell.**

**Rather, you’ll know you’re looking at it when you see someone living and giving and caring NOT because it’s working for him, but because he seems to know that that is what he was created for.**

**Faith is what’s behind it when she spends and sacrifices and risks herself trusting that, whatever the outcome, God won’t lose or waste or discard what she’s given.**

**Faith (not merely a collection of beliefs) is quite likely what it is when his concern seems to us to be excessive, her dreams are impossible ones, his love appears to be wasted if not trampled, or when she keeps on keeping on well beyond the normal dictates of her self-preservation instinct.**

**I read some time ago of an incident that took place in a Tennessee hospital that, for me, gets at it. A woman named Karen was pregnant with her second child. As part of preparing her three-year old son, Michael, for the coming of his unborn baby sister, she encouraged him to sit by her and to sing to the unborn baby each night. He did this, night after night.**

The pregnancy seems a normal one, but there was serious trouble at the time of delivery. Michael's baby sister barely survived the birth and was rushed to a neonatal intensive care unit in Knoxville. There the infant girl continued to become weaker. The physicians began to prepare the parents for her probable death.

Though too young to understand all that was going on, Michael kept asking his parents to let him see his little sister. He said he had to sing to her. He was so passionate about it at the beginning of the second week, they finally dressed Michael in a far oversized scrub suit and took him into the ICU to see his sister. The medical personnel were upset and said that he would have to leave. Karen protested vehemently and dug in saying, "He's not leaving until he sings to his sister." They reluctantly relented and Michael made his way to the bassinet and began to sing his same song: "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. You'll never know dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away."

The next day, the day they thought she might no longer be with them – they were able to bring Michael's sister home. Her improvement was sudden and astounding. A news article called it the "miracle of a brother's song." Karen called it an act of God. The physician dubbed it miraculous.

Astonishing as was the outcome, though, don't become completely mesmerized by the unexpected recovery. It is Michael we should remember. Little Michael knew nothing of alternative possible outcomes. His song wasn't a religious one. All he knew (with or without proper theological beliefs) was that he had a song to sing – a gift that he believed he was there to give not matter what anyone else thought.

Right there, in an exceedingly simple expression, is a strong hint of what faith looks like in a human being. You are a gift – you have gifts, and by God they're going to be given! I don't know what that might mean for each of the lives present here, but I hope we're working at it with all our hearts.