

FAITH AND THE LAW

June 19, 2016

1 Kings 19: 1-15; Psalm 42; Luke 8: 26-39; Galatians 3:23-29

In our reading from the Epistles today Paul is attempting to show the Galatians who have become Christian the appropriate relationship to Jewish law. Remember that in these early years Christianity was largely seen as a variation of Judaism. Gentiles, or non-Jews, wanted to know if they would have to follow the laws of diet and behavior that guided Jews in order to participate in the new life that Jesus and his disciples promised. This is something that Paul had to cope with for most of his mission and it was difficult for him and he seems to go back and forth on the issue as he addresses one audience and then another. Here he is telling the Galatians that they do not have to prove themselves by law, for faith has been revealed to them through Jesus.

When we examine what this might mean in our own lives, I don't expect any of us would think for even an instant that we might go out and run a red light because we were here in church today. But we might consider the relationship between our reliance on law and our faith in spirit. We might expand law to mean not only legalities, but also rules, goals and routines. And, we might think of faith as our infinite capacity to explore and accept the unproven, for our spirit to soar beyond the laws of physics. Indeed, we might think that if we are excessively bound by accepted rules, we neglect our capacity to find new truths. When our lives are limited to the observance of the law, we lose the infinite possibilities of the leap of faith.

And, I would like to argue, that when we keep ourselves safe by relying on the rules, we miss all that we can learn from the possibilities of creativity.

Now I gave this same message several years ago when I was teaching courses at the prison in Woodbourne and there was a story that went along with it that seems still relevant today. The prison is a men's prison and they have a theater and performance program and there had recently been a dance recital. One day one of the inmates, Robert, who was in the dance recital told me this story. It had apparently been very successful and the audience extremely enthusiastic.

Afterwards he asked one of the guards, who seemed a bit cross, how he had liked the performance. The guard said, "Tell me how a bunch of guys whooping and hollering about another bunch of guys leaping and jumping can do anyone any good?" And the inmate said, "Well, I'll tell you... it takes learning and skill and working together and trust in each other and discipline... that seems worth while."

So I say, art is an analogue for faith. We do not involve ourselves in it because we know that we will arrive at a perfect result. We do it because we venture out a little bit from the shore of what we know and in so doing we learn to swim and when we learn to swim we learn to trust the water and the way it changes and when we learn that, we learn out to work with it to venture even further. And so it is with faith... we do not go immediately from the constraints of our body to the realm of the spirit, but as we venture forth we learn a little more all the time.

In the prison, the guard depended on the rules to ensure security – his own and that of the whole institution. He didn't approve of the dance recital and the reception it got because its apparent lack of conformity to the rules made him nervous and that made him mad. We can sympathize with him, but at the same time we can see that all the things that Robert and his group learned would not have been possible

without some kind of a leap beyond those rules. I find myself constantly telling myself to “loosen up”, that everything doesn’t have to be done the same way all the time, that some times I can find new solutions to problems if I take a new path. And, surely, I cannot be alone in this.

We’ve all heard debates recently about school budgets and effective educational practices and the need for testing. Clearly we all want our children and grandchildren to learn the rules so that they can become successful and productive – get jobs, support themselves, stay away from trouble. If time or money is an issue, we may say that literature and arts programs are the extras, something to which we must reluctantly say good-bye. But let’s consider what we are losing first.

All the arts have rules, of course, and anyone who participates in the arts knows that just like any other endeavor, the best work is done when the rules have become a part of one’s being so that one can take creative leaps. And, speaking of leaps, athletes know the same truth. You can’t be great while you are thinking about it.

What kind of life would we have without the ancient and universal knowledge of music that can speak to us in ways that words alone never could? Remember Kurt Vonnegut who said, “Music is the only proof of God I need.” What would we be missing if the insights gained through theater were not available to us? And more than that, what of all that we learn in working with and depending on others in a theatrical productions? We may think of poetry as an isolated art but both the poet and the reader find new ways to experience the world and the self through the leaps

of association that poetry makes. And painting and visual arts reveal to both the viewer and the artist a revelatory way of seeing.

But, having now catalogued the fine arts, we must finally understand that art leads us to faith, for we must take chances. Think of all the ways that this happens –

- Art teaches us to follow inspiration
- Art shows us to use the rules to climb to the next revelation
- Art reveals the infinite possibilities of our own selves
- And isn't that what faith is – the trust that when we step out, we will be supported by the spirit within us?

My friend Robert, the inmate at Woodbourne, took a chance when he asked the guard what he thought, and more, when he told the guard the value of what he had just seen. He took a chance, but Robert had felt himself transformed by what he had done, by giving himself over to an expressive and creative effort with others, and he had faith in the virtue of what he had done, faith enough to have that conversation with the guard. “Good for you,” I said. “Good for you.”

So this is just a little plea, that in this tense and systematized and technical world, we take a little moment to realize of what we and our children are deprived if we treat art as a dispensable pleasure. We think of science as being necessary to our modern life, yet it was Einstein who said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”

Now, just to wander back to Paul and his Galatians for a moment. Is he talking about art and music and truth and beauty? For sure he is not. He is telling the

churches of Galatea that they are still part of God's promise to Abraham even if they do not follow the Jewish laws. He has something very specific that he wants to discuss. But just as Paul says that the Galatians do not need the disciplinarian because now they have received faith, so we might look at these words and let them inspire us to understandings of specific issues in our own lives, understandings that may lead us on to broader illuminations because of faith rather than rules.

Let us pray:

Lord:

Give us the strength to make the rules a part of ourselves so that we might step beyond them and be open to the mysteries of your vast creation.

Amen