

April 19, 2020: WHO YOU GONNA BELIEVE? Thomas in John 20:19

Dennis the Menace is featured in a cartoon in which he is clearly in the corner as punishment for some infraction. He looks over his shoulder and speaks to his mother the caption: "Who you gonna believe, me, or some old Sunday school teacher?" Simple cartoons can express profound truths that everybody is asking. Deep theological thoughts are so often hidden in wonderful, easy to understand contexts. Martin Luther would express this concept in a not so simple essay about 500 years ago: "What is good for us is hidden so deeply that it is hidden under its opposite. Thus our life is hidden under death---love for ourselves under hate for ourselves---salvation under damnation, heaven under hell---and universally our every assertion of anything good is hidden under the denial of it, so that faith may have its place in God, who is a negative essence and goodness and wisdom and righteousness, who cannot be touched except by the negation of all our affirmations."

Richard Rohr has reminded me in some of his recent writing that Franciscan theology is a process of "eliminating stuff" in order to be empty when God speaks to us in that quiet place deep within ourselves. Philosophers would speak throughout the centuries concerning epistemology which concerns the notion of "what do we know and how do we know it?" The big question in our journey as disciples must deal with exactly that. (read John 20:19-31)

Thomas knew in his perceptual field and understanding of the world that when people are crucified, they die. Apparently, he did not huddle in hiding with the other disciples the first time Jesus the Christ appeared in the flesh. Even when the followers of Christ testified that Jesus came to them, he was in disbelief. His knowledge of the world confronted the new reality of the risen Lord. In the Mark version of the gospel story, when Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and mother Mary reported that Jesus had risen from the tomb, their words seemed like "nonsense or a fable." The disciples had real trouble believing, even though Jesus told them well in advance and multiple times that he would be raised from the dead.

The entire Gospel message, complete with a heavenly afterlife, is the opposite of what we know to be true. We are expected to forgive again and again. We are asked to love our enemies. We are not supposed to judge others. We are supposed to "die daily to sin." The Beatitudes and all of the teachings of our Lord move us away from the natural pleasure-seeking pain-avoiding creatures that we are. Our Lord asks us to love the unlovable and forgive the unforgiveable. To follow the kerygma of Jesus the Christ, we give up our false, egomaniac selves in order to find a true self which is really quite unselfish. It is as if Jesus wants us to stand on our heads and do everything opposite from what the natural world values.

Parker Palmer would write that one has to be comfortable with paradox and a world of opposites in order to find what it means to live a life of integrity devoted to the Christian Gospel message. We are forced to behave in a way which totally eschews

everything in society. George Costanza depicts this in a very humorous manner. He is unemployed and lives with his parents. He uses all kinds of subterfuge and deceptive verbiage to woo women without any success. Then, he decides to approach a woman at the lunch counter with the sad truth: "Hi, my name is George and I live at home and am unemployed." Much to his utter surprise, the young woman gives him a "come hither" look and responds in a sexy voice, "Hi George!" By doing everything in an opposite way, George seems to have unlocked romantic success. His efforts to lie and paint himself as something he is not failed. This is very much part and parcel at the heart of Christ's teaching. He tells us in the Gospel that he gives us peace, "but not as the world knows it." When I have mowed my lawn on a hot summer day and enjoy a cold drink after paying my bills, there is a worldly peace. That isn't a bad thing necessarily, but it is not the same as a "peace that passes human understanding."

We are products of the Renaissance, reason and scientific method. Prior to the "age of reason," we were very superstitious, religious and ignorant. The pendulum has swung so far that "seeing is believing" has become our mantra. We have forgotten that our 5 senses are limited. We cannot hear what dogs and bats hear. We cannot see with the acuity of the eagle or the hawk. Jesus would talk about the wind and how it blows where and when it wants to. St. Paul would refer to the Cross as a scandal, something very impossible to believe in. Carl Sagan almost believed in an afterlife when a Methodist minister told him that the love he had for his wife couldn't be seen! John Calvin would teach us that only the Holy Spirit causes people to believe the Gospel. I believe that Jesus was God and that His teachings are the ultimate truth. I also believe that this makes no sense and is totally irrational. Yet I believe the Gospel came from God the Father to Christ the son and by the powers of the Holy Spirit to me. I believe this with my whole heart! This is well beyond my 5 senses. All of the world's major religions have things as part of their faith that defies reason. These are mysteries beyond what scientists or philosophers can prove. The facts of faith are quite different than test tubes or nuclear reactors. From the headlines, we learned that the rotation of a black hole is exactly what Albert Einstein saw in his mind. Audubon, the great ornithologist and painter would say that: "unless you see the bird in your heart, you will never see her with your eyes." A renowned sports photographer who recently died from the corona virus was quoted in the media to have said: "you can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus."

We are much more sophisticated than Thomas, the disciple. The pendulum of reality for us needs to swing back a bit to the "things beyond our seeing." Our prayer needs to be the same as the centurion in the Bible: "I believe---help my unbelief." Kierkegaard refers to a "leap of faith." We only get to that place with much prayer, contemplation and a wonderful savior who will help us if we keep asking.

*Michael Phoenix*

Interim Pastor

Covenant Presbyterian Church of Johnson City, TN