

REFLECTIONS
October 20, 2019
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Tom Banks
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Reading from 2nd Timothy Chapter 3: beginning at the 14th verse and continuing through the 4th chapter verse 5:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with utmost patience in teaching.

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away in myths.

As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

In these verses, Paul while in prison in Rome, writes to Timothy who has been a faithful follower of Christ. Timothy has walked the dusty roads of the near-east with Paul establishing new Christian communities. Timothy had learned of Christ Jesus from his mother and grandmother. His faith already strong, and now Paul writes encouraging him to continue "in what you have learned and firmly believed".

Timothy's firmness in faith spoke to me and contrast with my long faith journey. What had I "learned and firmly believed"?

I recall how 80 years ago in a Sunday School class in this very village, I began learning the stories of the Bible and of the teachings of Jesus. By mid-teens I was leading worship in that same chapel as we gathered prior to classes. After all, there was a Book of Common Prayer from which I could select a defined Order of Worship. There wasn't much thought required. I even selected the hymns we sang. As I recall, there was a lot of "Onward Christian Soldiers". World War II had recently ended.

Through high school and during college I continued attending church. However, there was little thought given to the meaning of what I had been taught. There was little to no new reading of Scripture nor was there an attempt to search for its meaning as it related to my life.

There was also such a discrepancy between Sunday and Monday, both in my own life and what I observed in others. It was, as I later read, what Soren Kierkegaard described in his tale of domestic geese at worship. Here, I paraphrase: Imagine, as he does that geese can talk, and they gather for divine worship. Every Sunday a gander would

preach. The sermon each time was of the glorious destiny of geese for which their maker had created them. They were to use their wings to fly away to a pasture to which they really belonged. Each time His name was mentioned the geese curtsied and the ganders bowed their heads. Then geese waddled home to meet next Sunday only to waddle home again. That was as far as they got. Their wings were never used. In a real sense, I never used my wings either.

I began questioning what I had been taught and thus realized that what I thought believed, was not. It was only taught. There were questions that confused me about what had learned, but no deep or true faith. It was as if there had been a firm space and now it was all sand. It was not a comfortable place.

Thomas Merton has written: "it was actually dangerous to put scriptures in the hands of people whose inner-self is not sufficiently awakened to encounter the Spirit". That described me well during those years of wandering in a desert of my own creation. I was certainly confused and frustrated. My inner-self was certainly in no position to encounter the Spirit.

It was not until many years later in an open, progressive United Church of Christ that some light began to be revealed at last. There the worship experience was inclusive, practicing an extravagant welcome, and the church was fully engaged in serving its wider community. Finally, the lessons of long ago had a new significance; a new truth and much greater meaning.

In that setting, I was introduced to Marcus Borg and through his writings came to see, as he wrote: "When a metaphorical narrative is understood metaphorically, it may indeed be powerfully, challengingly true." As I read, he gave me a new lens more clearly to see what was so foggy before. Borg became my go-to guru. Understanding metaphorically allowed me to trade the literal questions that had been baggage over so many years for a new meaning. The un-ending questions had provided no answers anyway. So using this different and powerful new narrative, the teachings of my youth began to have meaning; a new and unified coherence.

Borg speaks to my real need in his chapter on "Believing and Faith" in the book *Speaking Christian*, where he wrote: "There are some things that you can know, and other things you can only believe". He concludes the chapter with: "So beliefs matter. But we should not imagine that believing the right things is all that matters. Faith is a much deeper movement of the heart, of the self at its deeper level. Christian faith is allegiance to and a trust in God as known in Jesus".

From Kierkegaard I had read, "The object of faith is the reality of the Teacher, that the Teacher really exists. The answer of faith is therefore unconditionally, yes or no. For it does not concern a doctrine, as to whether the doctrine is true or not: it is the answer to a question concerning a fact: 'do you, or do you not, suppose that He has really existed?', and the answer is with infinite passion". I had found a passionate yes!

Richard Rohr in *The Universal Christ* writes, "Before the truth sets you free it tends to make you miserable". And that I had been. I set aside the questions, stopped the wandering and instead leaned on what now continues to speak to me.

As I approach my 87th year, in this I believe, or stated another way in these I trust: the Universal God, the "I Am" of both the Old and New Testaments; Jesus, God revealed in a human presence on earth; the Christ who was and is and is to be; and also, that God is to be found in all Things; you, me and the natural and physical universe. With this as my foundation of faith, my task, perhaps yours also, is as the pastor of that UCC church

in California reminded all at the conclusion of each of her worship services: "God has no hands but your hands, no feet but your feet, and no voice but your voice".

So be it!

Mary Bell
Luke 18: 1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant herself justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, Will he find faith on earth?"

I find this parable chilling at the end. Think about it: a world without faith, full of dispirited people. That's cold. And sad. And lonely. Can you envision a world without faith? I simply cannot. And so, I realized, I take faith for granted, assuming it's going to be here, be a part of us, central to our existence, always. So did the widow in the parable. Look at her. She even has faith in an unjust judge. He has no respect for God or for people. That should be an oxymoron, an unjust judge, but, sadly, it's not. The widow didn't really have faith that the judge would mete out justice, as was the judge's job, but simply that, somehow, even if it was by wearing the judge down with her persistence, she would get what she wanted. And she did. Now that's faith.

And this is where the parable both works for me and breaks down for me. Persistence is born of faith. Of course, we understand that. We pray, prayers of thanks, confession, praise, we ask God for guidance because we have faith - a core belief central to our souls that transcends belief - in God's unending love for us. But outcome? Will we get the outcome, in legal terms the relief, we want like the widow in the parable? I think not.

The concept of outcome is problematic for people of faith. We know what we want, what we should have, how things should turn out for us, but they often don't turn out that way, do they? We pray as Luke encourages us to, and we pray for good things - for relief from suffering, be it illness, a broken heart, political policy born of greed, bigotry, self-aggrandizement, and hate - and the suffering continues. We sigh, our hearts ache with disappointment and despair - and we continue praying because that's who we are — people of faith. Sometimes faith, in its rawest and purest form, requires us to forego even thinking about the outcome of our actions. Thinking about this, about faith regardless of outcome, brings me back to a moment I experienced recently. I have a visual impairment, a kind of maelstrom of problems I've dealt with all my life. But, miraculously to me, in July I had surgery that gave me enough vision in my left eye to discern shapes and sometimes objects for the first time in my life. When the patch was removed from my eye the next day, I wandered around the doctor's office while waiting for the surgeon like this (gesture) looking at the world anew. Literally. I could see a clock, a chair, a monitor. I went back to the examining room and sat in that big chair surrounded by lenses and equipment. And then I had to stand up. Like this (gesture). Looking at the world anew. Not just physically this time, but also emotionally, socially, cognitively and spiritually. In every way. I said, "God, I have no idea what lies ahead. I don't have a clue where life will take me. But with your Grace, I am going there." And then the

moment was over. Gone. And I sat down. That was a transformational moment for me, a moment of great faith, when I was profoundly moved by God's love for me and my faith in that love. I've had some tumultuous days since then, and that was only 3 months ago! And I've learned that I can't live with that level of spiritual awareness all the time - it's just too exhausting.

But, as people of faith, we can let go of desiring an outcome sometimes, and, by doing so, we can be in tune to that small, wise voice within us that is born of our faith in God and God's love for us. That voice is always there, but it's often drowned out by plans, goals, even by our concept of ourselves. I've had decades of my life when I didn't hear that voice at all. Or, if I did, it was on a totally unconscious level. I can hear that voice a little better than I used to, and, interestingly, sometimes people around me can hear me hear it. I don't know how that happens, but it's very cool when it does.

I knew someone at another church who could hear God call her by her name. "Cynthia, Cynthia", God called to her. And she listened. And she took action when she heard it. I have never heard God call me by my name. Have you?

Giving up outcome is not giving up responsibility. It is not mindlessly saying, "It's all in God's hands." To the contrary, it's the exact opposite. Giving up outcome requires us to TAKE responsibility for listening to that voice of wisdom within us and acting on it - hearing the call and taking action. Are we called to do something? Really? Me? And if so What? With whom? Where? When? How? As Reverend Lown reminded us two weeks ago, we are proactive, assertive, driven when we act on our faith.

In the parable, Jesus, who loves us so, is worried about us and about our faith. As well he should be, as he has complete insight into human weakness and frailty. What if, he asks, God grants us what we want, and still our faith fails us? What if Christ returns to a faithless world? I think here Christ wants us to cultivate and nourish our mustard seed of faith in whatever way that works for us. So, let's do that and, when we can, let's do it together and joyfully and in the spirit of love.