

PRACTICE FAITH
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September 28, 2014
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Exodus 17:1-7

The Israelites thirsted in the wilderness for water and complained against Moses. *Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?*

[To which I say: Good for them! People should complain when their leaders lead them into dead ends, fruitless endeavors or destructive practices and policies.]

So Moses cried out to the LORD, *What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.* Then the LORD showed Moses a rock and said *Strike it with your walking stick!* Moses struck the rock and water gushed forth.

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Over the past month or so, I've heard—as you have—the complaints of many Americans against the leadership of President Obama, complaints not unlike the complaints against Moses.

Have you led us to this time and place so we can die? What kind of leadership is that?

The complaints are many. Our borders are insecure. Illegal immigrants swamp our economy. Terrorists will soon invade our country. Wait!! Hold everything! They're already here beheading us randomly in the name of Islam.

Mr. President, have you led us to this time and place, so we and our children can be killed?

Can't you see we are thirsty? You must quench our thirst for revenge against those barbarians who behead innocent Americans. You must kill those evil people, those monsters who deserve death.

Mr. President, don't apologize to the United Nations for our racism, as if we are a flawed nation like the others. Proclaim America's exceptionalism proudly to the world. After all, we are the only nation with the might and the right to police the world. Besides, we don't kill innocent people. Our intentions are always good.

How can you hesitate, Mr. President? How can you deliberate and dither? How can you equivocate as though there might be another approach to terrorism? **THERE IS NO OTHER WAY!** Strike ISIS. Strike Iraq. Strike Syria. Kill somebody for god's sake and let our thirst be quenched. Protect us. Deliver us from evil!

By the way, I'm not making this litany up. Over the past month I've heard variations of these complaints repeatedly on a certain national news outlet that, according to polls, echoes the sentiment of many American citizens, including, I suppose, some of us here.

Some of us have different complaints against our national leadership. Some of us thirst for a different kind of justice. We have come to a harsh and cruel time and we are thirsty for more compassion, compassion for the sick, the poor, refugees, and prisoners. We thirst for peace.

But once again the drumbeat for war resounds across our land. And just like that, bombs strike the ground, spewing blood like water from a rock to quench a certain thirst for revenge. And that's a certain faith in action. It's the faith and creed of many: *Only violence will end violence—violence as the way, the truth and the life.* Yes, it's a particular kind of faith. And many practice it.

But it's not the kind of faith our Beloved Lord practiced.

Jesus trusted the way of love, even love for enemies. And I'm pretty sure killing enemies is not what Jesus had in mind. He had something else in mind.

Let the mind of Christ be in you. These are the words of the Apostle Paul. (Philippians 2:4-8).

Let the mind of Christ be in you, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but rather emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross, which at that time was the Roman Empire's deterrent against terrorism. In case you hadn't heard, in the first century, young Jewish men were crucified by the thousands and displayed along public highways as a warning to would-be terrorists.

Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. He would love his enemies even if it killed him—obedient to the point of death.

But did that end violence once and for all? Is there any proof that approach works? Who can practice faith like that?

Listen well, O peoples of the earth, to inner promptings of the Spirit; Let Silence enter your house that you may hear! For within your heart Love speaks. Psalm 78 (Merrill)

Listen well.

The word *obedience* comes from the Latin word to hear, to listen well. It connotes attention in a certain direction. So we might ask: what happens when we attend to the voice that Jesus attended to? What happens when we give ourselves up and over as a servant of love?

Well, I can tell you one thing that will happen: self-doubt.

Wait a minute, we say. I thought my job was to fulfill myself; not empty myself. How in the world can I become more if I become less? How can I be sure love drives out hate? How can I know forgiveness will set me free of hatred and hurt? How can I be sure that's the right way to go? Should I risk all for love? Who says so? Why should I trust that preacher up there?!

And that's the question put to Jesus by his critics as portrayed in the gospel lesson today. (Matthew 21:23-32). *By what authority do you say such things, they asked?*

I can't tell you, said Jesus. He couldn't say, not because he was coy. Jesus couldn't say because authority cannot be proven by words or pedigrees, but only by experience, by practice. I can't name my authority, he said. But I can tell you this for what it's worth.

A father had two sons. He asked the first to work in the vineyard and the son said, No, I won't. But later changed his mind and went out to work.

The second son said, Yes, I will, but never went out to work.

So, asked Jesus, which son did the will of the father? The one who said the right thing or the one who did the right thing?

In other words, turn off the audio; watch the video and you'll learn a lot about others and yourself.

It's one thing to say, I have faith in the way of love; it's something else to put that faith into practice, to be faithful in the way of love. Can we practice that kind of faith?

I know it's a lot to ask of our nation at a time like this. When fear and panic grip the heart of the nation, it may be too much to expect our leaders to walk a different path, a path of building a wholesome climate of compassion, of building positive, life-giving structures—building a land where love shines through. It may be too much to expect; but it's not too much to ask of the country we love.

And we must ask it of ourselves as well. *Who or what do we put our trust in? What kind of faith do we practice?*

I don't know, but I can guess many, if not all of us, have come to a certain place, not for the first or last time—a certain place or situation where all hope for finding love in a given situation or relationship has dried up. It feels like we've been banging our head against a rock and getting nothing in return. We wonder how we ever got here and how we'll ever get out. We're dying of thirst, thirst for wisdom and guidance, thirsty for a break.

And that's where faith and faithfulness comes in—or doesn't. Will you trust the Holy One to meet your need in that certain place, in that certain situation? I don't know but I can guess there's something or someone nearby who holds the wisdom and love you need, like water hidden in a rock.

Go head. Tap that source. Practice faith in love and see what happens. See if love will guide you.

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HYMN

If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee