

SAVING FACE

Last summer it was revealed that throughout much of her life Mother Theresa experienced great doubts about her relationship with God. Her misgivings were expressed in many soon to be published letters, written to her closest confidants. They were never intended for public consumption, but came to light when the Vatican began to gather up her papers as part of the canonization process.

The sixty-six letters, written over a span of fifty years, reveal a woman deeply troubled by doubts and concerns. Often they depict real inner struggle and pain, and a sense of desolation. And clearly, in the midst of her amazing work with the poor, the dying and the destitute, she often felt a spiritual destitution of her own.

In one of her books, Mother Theresa writes: "We need the eyes of deep faith to see Christ in the broken bod[ies] and dirty clothes [of the poor] . . ." (*No Greater Love*, 30) But in one of the letters, written to her confessor Michael Van Der Peet, she says: "Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear."

As essayist Richard Rodriguez writes: "With each face she bathed, it was as if she was looking for God's face, and so often all that stared back at her was the face of human suffering." (PBS Newshour, 10-4-07)

Reflecting on the seeming dissonance between her public words and her private letters, atheist and founder of the Freedom from Religion Foundation Dan Baker declared Mother Theresa a hypocrite. "She was forced to go through the motions," he said, "and admitted her own hypocrisy." (www.abc.news.go.com)

But is it hypocritical to move forward in the life of faith even if we have questions? Is it hypocritical to follow the teachings of Jesus even though one has doubts and fears? Or, rather, is it a sign of courage and ultimate faith?

Our scripture lesson this morning provides a vivid metaphor for our conversation. Jacob, one of the patriarchs of Israel, one of the great founders of the faith, is headed back home to meet his brother Esau for the first time in years. Decades earlier, just before Jacob had left behind his home, he had cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance. But now God has told Jacob that he must go back and reconcile with Esau. He has traveled some distance and he and Esau are to meet again for the first time in the morning. As Jacob falls into a fitful sleep along the banks of the Jabbok River he is very nervous. He is clearly worried,

questioning whether this is the right thing to do, whether or not he really heard the voice of God.

Does he have a dream? Does he really encounter God in human form?

Who's to say, but whatever the case, whether it is merely the result of his own inner turmoil, or a physical confrontation, Jacob wrestles in the night with God, and out of that wrestling comes both pain and blessing.

You see, the scriptures are full of examples of men and women who wrestle with God, full of examples of folks who question their faith.

Think of Sarah, who laughs when told God will send her a child.

Or the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, questioning if God even exists.

Or Elijah, who feels totally abandoned by God.

Or Thomas—the classic doubter of all time—who demands concrete proof of the resurrection.

The Bible is full of those who doubt, who question, who wrestle with God.

And so is the story of the church. Some of the greatest saints throughout time have wrestled with their faith. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Abraham Lincoln, and so many others. Indeed those who make the greatest contributions to church and society are often those who doubt, who question, who wrestle.

Galileo, who challenged the traditional understandings of the church in his day, once said: "I do not feel obligated to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense reason and intellect, has intended us to forego their use."

To have doubts, to have questions, is not a mortal sin. In fact it's not a sin at all. It is, rather, the natural result of using our brains.

Theologian Marcus Borg suggests that our seeing doubt as a sin, or as a sign of spiritual weakness, is directly related to the fact that we moderns tend to equate faith in God with intellectual assent. All too often we understand faith to be what we believe *about* God. He writes: "It suggests that what God really cares about is the belief in our heads . . . as if having correct 'beliefs' is what will save us. And, if you have incorrect beliefs you may be in trouble . . ." (*The Heart of Christianity*, 30)

But, while doctrine, our intellectual beliefs about God, is not unimportant, in the end what matters most is if we trust in God's love enough to be loving towards others. For that is how we best demonstrate our love for God. "The Christian life is as simple and as challenging as this," writes Borg, "to love God and to love that which God loves." (Ibid, 41)

Mother Theresa confronted poverty most of us cannot even imagine. She held untold numbers of children emaciated by AIDS and starvation. She saw mothers abandon their babies. She cared for those who died in agony. Is it any wonder she questioned God's love? Yet, and this is the important reality, even in the face of that doubt, even as she continued to wrestle with God, she carried on with her work.

I've just finished a wonderful book written by fellow Bangor Seminary graduate Kate Braestrap. It is a memoir of sorts, recounting her experiences after the tragic death of her husband Drew. Drew was a Maine State Trooper who was killed in an automobile accident. Before his death, he had been planning on going to seminary. When his dream was cut short, his wife Kate picked it up

After graduation, Kate was ordained by the Unitarian Universalists, and became the chaplain for the Maine State Game Wardens.

Maine is a huge state, covered by thousands and thousands of acres of forests and lakes. Game wardens are not only responsible for tracking down poachers and making sure folks have their fishing license, they are also those called in to look for lost campers and to rescue victims trapped on cliffs or under fallen trees.

The chaplain's job includes supporting family members as a search is conducted for lost loved ones and helping to notify next-of-kin when someone has died in the woods. But the chaplain's most important role is supporting the game wardens themselves as they go about their sometimes grueling and gruesome work.

Chaplain Braestrap tells of one such time, following the death of a little girl who'd gotten trapped under the ice. After they have spoken with her parents, Kate and the Game Warden, Frank Gibney, sit in his truck reviewing the events of the day.

"I found her mittens by the hole [in the ice] . . ." the warden tells the chaplain. "They were bright red . . . She must have taken them off, maybe thinking she could grab onto the ice with her fingernails. . . . The water was only up to my waist, but it would have been over her head. They called the dive team, but we didn't really need them. I just broke a path through the ice, stomped through with my boots . . ." Then, making a cradling gesture with his arms, the warden says, "I pulled her out like this God, she must have been so scared." Then,

obviously wrestling with it all, Warden Gibney turns to Kate and says, “How the hell is this part of God’s plan?” (*Here If You Need Me*, 187)

It’s a question she’s heard before. One she’s wrestled with on a very personal level. Why, she has wondered, did her husband Drew die at such a young age? And she has had to help her four children deal with the question as well. It wasn’t part of any divine plan, she tells them. God didn’t cause it. It was an accident. “God did not back the truck into your father’s car. Nowhere in scriptures does it say ‘God is death.’ God is justice and kindness, mercy and always—always—love. So if you want to know where God is in this or anything, look for love.” (Ibid)

Little girls who wear red mittens are not supposed to die under a frozen lake in Maine. Its not part of God’s plan. Such things may indeed cause us to question where God is—even *if* God is. In theological circles, it’s known as theodicy. The question of how there can be a good God when there is so much evil in the world. It is a question human beings have always had to deal with, so will you and I. We can, and will, have doubts and concerns. We will question and wrestle and struggle as we deal with the world around us.

The real issue is not what we think but rather what we do and who we are. Mother Theresa may have doubted that God could be found in the faces of starving children, but she still held them in her arms, fed them bowls of rice, helped them find their way. She may have questioned her intellectual understanding of God, but she still acted as if it was true. She still loved her neighbor, even while wondering about God’s presence in her own life. And in doing the things she did she proved that the love of God is alive and well and present in the world.

After recounting the story of the little girl with red mittens, Chaplin Braestrap comes to her own conclusions. “Here is my answer to the theodicy problem in a nutshell,” she writes. “Frank took the child from under the ice with his own hands, tried to give her his breath and his heart broke when he could not save her. Frank *is* the answer.” (Ibid, 189)

Sisters and brothers, even in the face of doubt, even in the face of fear and concern, even in the midst of Jacobean wrestling matches with God, Frank Gibney and Mother Theresa and you and I are all called to be the answer. For it’s not about what we think about God. It’s not even about how we feel. Rather our faith in God is all about how we respond; it is all about what we do. For each and every time we act out of love, we demonstrate the reality of God. And in the end, it is the only way the world can see the saving face of God.

Amen

John H. Danner

