

Which Faith Do You Mean? The Heart of Christianity 2

Matthew 6:25-33

Chapter 2, The Heart of Christianity

Last Sunday evening I left for Tampa to participate in the task force set up by the denomination to develop strategies for planting Spanish-speaking congregations in North America. You may be aware that we have over 50 MCC congregations scattered throughout Central and South America but we presently only have one congregation in North America with a Spanish-speaking outreach, even though the United States is now the second largest Spanish speaking nation in the world, second only to Mexico.

My plans called for me to fly to Chicago to connect with a flight to Tampa. My flight from Minneapolis however was late due to mechanical problems and so I missed my connection and it was the last flight to Tampa from Chicago that night, so I had to wait until the next morning to catch a flight. Bill called me that night to ask if I had heard the news about Osama bin Laden, which I had not. Several people have said to me, "I feel glad but I'm not sure if I should feel glad." It is a good thing to feel relief that this man can no longer cause harm to thousands of other families. Feel glad that no American soldiers were lost in his capture and that no accidental (what politicians call "collateral") damage was done. Feel glad that the world is a bit safer place today because he is not here. But I caution you to be careful about making the connections between this man and Islam or this man and a people of the world. His decisions and actions brought his consequences.

Monday morning I got up early and was at the Chicago airport by 7:30AM. I went to the gate the departure board told me where my flight would leave and I waited for my 9:30AM flight. Besides me, there was an extended Chinese family occupying the waiting area. I sat and studied for my sermon by re-reading the chapter from "The Heart of Christianity." Soon I realized I had been sitting there for quite a while and no plane. I went up to the agent who had just arrived and asked. She said the gate had been changed and my plane just left. No

announcements were made and so I was stuck until a 2:30 flight that afternoon.

I went to the new gate to pass the time until my afternoon flight but by now I was a little more skeptical. Every couple of hours I would go out and check the Board just to make sure I was still at the right gate because I no longer trusted anyone would tell me. Sure enough, about three hours later, the gate for my flight was changed and again there was no announcement. If I hadn't been checking I might still be sitting in O'Hare airport. So I trudged down to the new gate. This time the destination sign matched my ticket and everything looked to be fine when the agent announced the plane we were scheduled on was having mechanical difficulty and that they would have to find us another plane "somewhere." After another hour's delay, a plane was found and I made it to Florida for my meeting. I made a mental note about flying that particular airline through Chicago again.

The group gathered at an Episcopal retreat center near Sarasota for our meetings. It was beautiful with the Spanish moss in the trees and lots of palm trees. We packed a great deal of work into the two days we were there and have begun to produce a resource manual for congregations wishing to reach out to the Spanish-speaking community. We don't have all the answers but we have stepped out in faith as a denomination to say this is a priority over the next five years and here are some ways to make it happen. Also, just so you know, we did take an evening off to cruise around the inter-coastal waterway with Rev. Vickey and her boat. Pastors in Florida live on canals that have manatees and dolphins and palm trees. Hmmm.

This living by faith thing is really difficult. For many of us we think of faith as something we believe or decide so it becomes a head matter. Our Easter sermon series from "The Heart of Christianity" helps us to see that faith is the way of the heart.

So actually there are many ways to live out our faith and you will find elements of all of these in the Bible. Borg does a good job in the book of breaking these down. He helps us see how each of these understandings

is formed and how it is used in the Christian life. He identifies four ways people live out their faith.

The first is Faith as Assensus. This is faith as assent. We usually think of this as believing something is true. This type of faith equates truth with factuality – truth is something that can always be verified as fact. This approach depends on the scientific method that became popular after the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment so this way of thinking is fairly recent (16th/17th century). From this perspective faith is understood like this: What God really cares about is that we believe the right things. The opposite of this kind of faith is doubt/disbelief.

The second type of faith is Fiducia. This is faith as a radical trust in God. This understanding of faith calls us to trust a set of statements about God as well as trusting that God is safe. Matthew's gospel tells us that the birds of the air don't worry so why should we. In other words, it is safe to put our trust in God. The opposite of this type of faith is anxiety.

The third type of faith is Fidelitas. This is faith as faithfulness. We usually think of this in interpersonal relationships. We know what it means to be faithful to our partner – it implies a sense of loyalty, allegiance, commitment of self at the deepest levels. Rather than a faithfulness to statements about God, this type of faith requires a radical centering in God. Faith means nurturing relationships, paying attention to our spiritual health through worship, prayer, service and justice. This type of faith is found in the Bible in the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." The opposite of this type of faith is idolatry – which is placing one's confidence in something other than our commitment to God.

The last type of faith is Visio. This is faith as vision. It is a way of seeing the whole as gracious. This type of faith leads to radical trust. I don't have to wonder if I'm going to heaven or even if there is a heaven in the form I've been told. I simply trust God with eternity. This type of faith allows us to be present in the moment because we trust the goodness of God's reality. The opposite of this type of faith is seeing the world as a hostile reality.

I decided to put my experience at the Chicago airport to this faith test and see what each of these ways of living faith could have informed my experience. If I used my assensus faith, I would need to know the way United Airlines operates so that I could navigate when gates are changed. Using fiducia, I realized I was safe in O'Hare airport. I had food, shelter and no harm was going to come to me. As fidelitas, I could see loyalty to United to be greater than this one bad experience. As visio, I realized that life is an adventure and that this experience would make a great sermon illustration.

When I was in seminary, one of the last projects we had to complete before graduation was a thesis called a "Credo." It is supposed to be an explanation of our systematic theology. As you can tell, credo and creed come from the same root meaning. We often use the creeds – like the Apostles or Nicene Creeds – to recite the things we believe about God. The word "credo" comes from the first line of those creeds that says, "I believe..." Borg suggests that because of the post-Enlightenment world in which we live, we too easily make that term "I believe" as something that happens in the head. We are prone to faith as assensus. He suggests that the deeper meaning of the word is "I give my heart to."

Think about that. I don't really care what you believe about whether the earth is flat or round, or if the sun rotates around the earth or the earth around the sun. I want to know what you give your heart to. I want to know what fills you with passion and joy. I want to know what motivates you to act and change. I want to know what gives you comfort in times of distress. I want you to know this experience of faith that helps you see the work of God all around you and in you. I want you to know a faith that informs how you live, how you think and how you are moved. We all think different things, believe different things, assume different things, experience different things. What holds us together as a community is that here together we are learning to give God our hearts.

When we do, we find ways to make our ministry accessible to Spanish-speaking people. We find ways to make sense out of something as horrible as terrorism. We find ways to honor the women who nurtured

and nourish our lives. We even find ways to make sense of airline procedures. That's the kind of faith we are building together. That's the kind of faith we are discovering together.

Sources:

www.homileticsonline.com A Sustainable Life, February 2011.

Borg, Marcus J. The Heart of Christianity, chapter 2, "The Way of the Heart."