

What Does it Mean to be Faithful?

Christ Church, Grosse Pointe

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May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us, be with us this day, and remain with us always. Amen.

Today as I visit the folks at Christ Church Grosse Pointe, a number of young people and some adults will be making a mature affirmation of faith. That is they will stand before the community gathered and me, by their very presence saying that they wish to follow Jesus.

I wonder why? And what does that mean? What might it mean for them and what might it mean for me and you, for all of us?

All my life I've been trying to live out my faith with varying degrees of success. I will not bore you with my list of failures.

Here are the questions that keep coming back to me, when I contemplate believing.

Why follow Jesus Christ?

What does it mean to be faithful?

I offer you my stories by way answers and invite all of you to contemplate your stories, all the while wondering what is it, how is God calling us to be faith-filled in this next period of your life?

I'm a follower of Jesus for several reasons. One is birth. I was born into my faith. My parents were both deeply devout, Irish Catholics. My mom who died nine years ago, embodied her faith with her prayers for her kids and anyone else she heard of who needed assistance. Her novenas were legendary. (I miss her.)

My dad is 90 now, and seemingly quintessentially religious without an ounce of spirituality. He follows religious rules because he's afraid of what might happen if he doesn't.

My mom once lamented that of their four children I was the only who went to church. To which my dad, after some thought replied, "Well you know Mary, Bonnie gets paid to go to church."

They are both pretty funny.

I was born into my belief. And I do think I've always had a longing for the divine. As a child I didn't mind terribly going to church. We mostly went to base chapels because my dad was an officer in Marine Corps, and by and large those chaplains, could preach, so church was interesting.

When I was 9 when we were stationed in Hawaii, I remember being out in Waimea Bay in the summer on my boogie board. The sun was setting. And for whatever reason, I decided to turn my board into the sun's light and paddle along the sun's golden reflection on the

water. I just paddled and paddled, following the trail of the sun. I remember thinking I was engaged in something Holy.

Heaven only knows where my parents were, somewhere on the beach I suppose. That was back in the day, when kids were a bit more feral and free range, and seemingly it was ok for their daughter to paddle out to sea unsupervised. I was however, an excellent swimmer.

Later when I was 16 I went on retreat, a kid's Cursillo and had a life-changing experience. In the course of the retreat, that I wound up going on because I had lost a bet, the priest came and asked me and the kids in my small group, how it was going. I replied that it was fine, but I'd not had a life-changing experience. And as a 16-year-old I believed I deserved a life-changing experience. The priest chatted more and eventually I wound up saying that I was pretty sure that if God knew everything I'd ever done, said or thought of, I was pretty sure that God wouldn't like me. So the priest asked if I had ever told God that. To which I said, "Well if God knows everything, why would I have to tell God that...?"

Then for the hey of it, there was a cross, a crucifix across the room, and I looked at that cross and I said, I prayed silently, "I am so afraid of you." Then this thing happened, that I didn't know could happen, so I know I didn't make it up, and I had this rush of warmth that started at my toes and went all the way up my body, and I couldn't stop crying and laughing, and I must have blushed for 45 minutes straight, because in that moment I knew that God in the person of Jesus Christ, loved me for who I was, as I was, completely and utterly.

In that moment it went from being my parent's religion to my faith. Now—it's a heck of a thing to peak spiritually when you are 16. I haven't had anything that transformative happen since then.

I have spent my life, as a person of faith, who is also periodically riddled with doubt. Why doubt? Because it's hard to live in this world as it is and not wonder whether or not there is a God who cares. And yet...I choose to try to follow the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, because without his example of care and love, sacrifice and welcome, I think I'd be much farther along a path of self-absorption and cynical despair.

I follow Jesus, the Christ, because 2000 years ago, he created a community, which did not stop. I follow Jesus because he chose to sacrifice his life to offer a different way of being, and then after he was killed on the third day, somehow he rose from the dead and his followers, saw him, experienced him in such a profound way that they talked about it with other people in such a way that 2000 years later we are still talking about it.

I follow Jesus, because someday I believe completely and other days, I don't believe at all, but it beats the alternatives. I follow Jesus, because in the midst of Christian communities, I have grown and been loved into my better self. And when I have fallen massively short of goodness those same people in those same communities have forgiven me, and showed me that they had a faith in me that I could be better.

That's why I follow Jesus. And love to hear after the service, why you follow Jesus.

The second question I posed, was: "What does it mean to be faithful?"

Each of us will likely have a different answer to that question. I have hinted to you about my sense of being faithful.

Being faithful, having faith for me, does not mean certainty. Alan Jones, the late dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco said that, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, the opposite of faith is certainty."

And certainty regarding one's faith, from my perspective is smug assurance. And there is absolutely nothing compelling to anyone about smug assurance. Even Jesus Christ had his moments of doubt and despair. We need only remember his words on the cross, in Mark's Gospel, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

Faith is a verb, faith is a muscle that we build and work every day.

At various points in my life, I have found different practices helpful in enabling me to have a sense of God, and the Holy in my life. These days, I have morning routine, of making oatmeal and berries for me and my spouse and then sitting and spending some time in quiet reflection. As I eat, I read a spiritual or religious book of some sort. Recently I've been deeply immersed in Walter Wangerin's novel about the apostle Paul. Before that I was reading a series of books on contemplative prayer and meditation by Martin Laird.

I also endeavor to spend 20 mins a day in contemplative prayer. A practice of meditation, where I center my breathing and focus on a prayer word or phrase, trying to clear my mind of stray thoughts and instead allow God's luminous presence to fill my soul.

In my three years of practice, I've had one overwhelming experience of God's luminous presence... but who's counting. Which brings me to the point, that prayer practices are just that, practices, that create places in our life where we intentionally open ourselves to God.

My spiritual director and colleagues remind me that the point of partaking in these practices is not about winning. It is my predisposition to turn all things into a competition. My spiritual director also tells me that the prayer is not so much about the 20 minutes spent in contemplation as it is the other 23 hours and 40 mins of the day. He says, those 20 mins of calm, build up and buoy us through the rest of our waking day.

Weekly eucharist, and the bible study and theological reflection I engage in and avoid as I write my weekly sermons are also means by which I try to connect with God.

Each of us will have different practices in different times in our lives. For some of you an intentional period of walking and praying or running and praying will soothe your soul. For others, saying morning and evening prayer, noonday prayer of compline will ground you in God.

There is no one right way of opening ourselves to God's presence. Our practices are likely to change as our lives change.

What matters is that we who long to follow Jesus, set some time to connect.

For our young people who will be confirmed, for all today who are making an adult profession of faith and for all of us here today and all who are yet to walk through our doors, my prayer, my hope and my longing is that they, we will, learn more about what Jesus

said, what he did, who he loved, and those for whom he seemed to have little time. That we learn more and that we will understand that faith is created, assembled and sustained, bit by bit and morning by morning. That faith a cloth of being, woven with many holes of doubts, fears and uncertainties, but still we gather the yarn, spin the threads that create a community of care and a life of grace that enables us to be courageous, compassionate disciples, followers of Christ.

Amen.