

ERASE THE DISTANCE

We talked last week, I hope not too glibly, about trusting God. The Christian Life is about trusting God. It is difficult to remember because all around us are people who talk, think, and act like the purpose of Christianity is to answer our questions and then get us to believe those answers. The implication is that if we believe correctly and give the correct answers to all the important religious questions, then we will be saved; God will approve of us and take us into Heaven if we have the right views and opinions. The implication is that faith means believing, and believing correctly. Only, faith does not mean believing – it means trusting.

Do you love your children because you think they have all the right opinions about everything? Do you love your children because of all the poor people they feed? Oops, different sermon. We have a lot of sacred cows mixed in with Christianity in our time, and many of them are so skinny they cannot even stand up without the constant bolstering of secular assumptions and opinions.

In any case, our beliefs are important to us. They help us to explain what we think has happened to us. We hope they will help us to respond better to whatever is still coming. But what God gets to work with in real life, with each one of us, is how much we trust God. Our beliefs are always flawed, always incomplete. To the degree that we trust God, our lives are filled with gratitude, and our obedience is in willingness and eager anticipation.

We also study the Bible, in the hope that the records of the life of Jesus and the faithful witness of those who came before us will keep us on track – at least more on track than if we just go off making it up as we go. But the Bible is words and translations of words, and it is easy to get careless, as we all know. Besides that, we have lots of conscientious Christians running around assuming that because they can read a passage in English, they understand precisely and exactly what the author of that passage was trying to say. All through the years I have had such people pointing to a verse in the Bible and, with irate passion and raised voice, say to me: “It says so right here in plain English.” Frequently behind that, some person they thought was an authority has also told them what the Bible is saying in plain English.

Only, the Bible does not say *anything* in English. It speaks essentially in Hebrew and Greek. Frequently the irate person is pointing to a text in the King James Version of the Bible, which is demonstrably the least accurate of any English translation available to us. Already some of you are running into relatives and friends in conservative churches who are telling you that I am apostate, that I am misleading you, that I have it all wrong. I have been here what – four weeks, five Sundays? And already I have been consigned to Hell three times that I know of. Besides, they know it all with absolute precision and certainty because they have been reciting what others have told them for five or ten years, whereas I have only been studying with diligence and with the help of the best scholars on the planet for seventy years. But they are right about one thing: they are absolutely certain that they are right about everything. I have no such certainty. I only tell you the best that I know – so far.

Back to the difference between what we believe and how much we trust God. The confusion is made more difficult because many times when the New Testament says “believe,” it means “trust.” In the Book of Acts (16:25-34), Paul and Silas, having been beaten and jailed in Philippi, are praying and singing hymns together when an earthquake rocks the jail so severely that the doors of the jail come open. Assuming that the prisoners have all escaped and knowing that he will be held responsible, the jailer is about to fall on his own sword. But Paul shouts out, “Do not harm yourself, we are all here.”

The jailer is both amazed and grateful, and it makes him realize that he wants the kind of life he has seen in Paul and Silas: singing despite the beating and imprisonment; staying around instead of fleeing when they could have. So he asks, “What must I do to be saved?” That’s the English. “How can I find the quality of peace and confidence and fearlessness I have seen in the two of you ever since you arrived?” That’s me trying to understand.

By the way, most of our conservative Christian friends just assume that “being saved” has something to do with not getting thrown into Hell. So how do they explain the fact that Paul never mentions Hell? Paul has no interest in Hell. Whatever he means by “saved,” it is not about some future fiery pit. If it will help you to remember, I will be glad to pay any of you a hundred dollars for any and every New Testament passage you can find where Paul mentions Hell. Luke *does* mention Hell – once, in passing. (Luke 12:5) Actually, he is talking about “authority.”

Back to our story: The jailer asks, “What must I do to be saved?” Then we hear the reply from Paul and Silas – a very well-loved verse for many conservative Christians: “*Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.*” That’s the King James translation. “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.*” That’s the New International Version, trying to be both more accurate and closer to our current way of saying things. But more accurate than either is the Revised English Bible: “*Put your trust in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.*” Faith is TRUST. It is not about some objective intellectual agreement with various axioms or opinions. Faith *means* trust. Trust goes clear to the wall with everything we know and have.

There is no time today to talk about salvation – what it means to be “saved.” If you go away asking the question “What does it mean to be saved?” – I mean asking it fresh, never mind all the add-on bunk and baloney – then it will be a great day indeed.

Today the word “faith” has picked up all kinds of sentiment and garbage that have little or nothing to do with its New Testament meaning. Faith is a kind of “magic wand” you can pull out to sprinkle fairy dust on whatever is not going the way you want it to; faith is optimism or having a positive attitude; faith is a commodity in itself – some people have it; some people do not. This is all ludicrous, from a New Testament perspective. Jesus tells us His own definition of faith. (Luke 7:1-10) It comes in an encounter Jesus has with a Roman Centurion whose servant Jesus heals. Afterward, Jesus turns to the crowd and says, “*I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*” This Centurion trusts Jesus’ authority. And Jesus tells us this is one of the best pictures of faith that we will ever see. But what does Jesus know? We can go back to the magic wand theory if we want to.

We are the Christian Faith – not the Christian Fact. We trust God without having all the answers. Faith means TRUST! If we want the New Life in Jesus the Christ, what we believe at the moment is no longer at the top of our priority list. How much do we *trust* God? How much do we *trust* Jesus to be revealing to us what God is really like? What can we be like if we truly trust God? And do we get any hints from Jesus about what God really wants of us and for us?

I have been suggesting that the core of the Christian Life is not about our questions or what we believe. It is about how much we trust God. Along the way I have mentioned (about eight or nine times) that everything important in Christendom is about relationships. Most of

you already know that and already agree. Only, we will eventually have to ask ourselves: If the church in our time knows this, why does the church (on local, conference, and national levels) not act like it knows this? Why does the church not make relationship the top priority?

Why is trust so central to our Path? Why is it so important for us to trust God? Well, it sounds good and feels right. If God really exists and if we really believe in God, doesn't it follow that we should trust God? Of course, yes. So why is it that nobody here – *nobody* – actually totally and fully trusts God? I mean across the board and in all circumstances? If any of us totally and completely trusted God, we would be perfect. There would be no fear left; no half-hearted devotion; no hesitation in our obedience; no tentativeness in our love. How many of us completely and totally trust God? (A show of hands, please.)

We are truly and authentically on the Path – we are indeed pilgrims. But “on the WAY” does not claim or imply that we have arrived – that we are at the end of our journey. If our trust *increases*, so will our joy, our obedience, and our gratitude. That is wonderful, and it fills us with HOPE. But the truth remains that trusting God is our biggest issue – our biggest problem.

Why is trust so central to our Path? Because trust is the ground – the foundation – of all relationship. And everything important about the Christian Life is about relationship. Of course, we have many relationships, but the primary relationship – the one on which all our other relationships depend – is our relationship with God. That was and is Jesus' top priority. He comes to reconcile us to God. Jesus knows that if He can heal or restore or improve our relationship with God, all other areas of our lives will get more open to the immense power and influence of God's love for us.

That is one of the biggest surprises of coming to know Jesus. We begin to realize that it is not God who is holding back. We are! We are the ones keeping the distance between ourselves and God. We are the ones with the shields up. We are the ones with qualms enough, fear enough, bad experiences enough, betrayal enough, and wounds enough to want to keep our distance – our independence. Our relationship with God is always partial – always cut back – because we are determined to keep our safety nets in place.

So Jesus does not sucker-in to Satan's temptations. Feeding the hungry is not good enough. If that becomes the focus of Jesus' ministry, it will only sidetrack the real purpose. "*Man does not live by bread alone.*" With uncanny love and obedience, Jesus keeps His eye on the real goal: reconciliation with God. If the flaw in the mainframe can be healed, all else will follow. Nothing else is worth that Cross – but reconciliation with God is!

What will happen to us if we get really close to God? Not just "sort of"; not just in our spare time; not just when it is convenient or when we have nothing else to do. What would happen to us if we got really close to God?

There are so many things that God will not do for us – until we get close enough to trust God and to ask God for the gifts we need. The principle of free will, as most of you know, governs all spiritual growth on this planet. God never coerces; never straight-arms us; never moves in to control us against our will. When God gets dramatic, it is always because on some level we invited it, we asked for it – we became willing to receive the interference.

But the truth is, we have no idea what God's true influence and power can be like. When we get even glimmers, we call it miracle and mystery. Can God change your life; heal you; inspire you; empower you for tasks you know you would love – if you knew for sure that God would be with you? I mean if you got really close?

We all think we know, at moments. But we do not know. Theorizing about what life might be like if we trusted God more – trying to imagine it, pretend it, or be logical about it – just keeps things in the realm of fantasy. Actually, lots of people like to keep religion mostly in the realms of fantasy; it's all so much safer that way.

Speaking of trust, do you trust Jesus' parables? I know quite a few people who think Jesus' parables are mostly for our entertainment – a good moral here or there, and interesting, but not hard-core serious like the rest of Jesus' ministry. I get more and more convinced that if a parable does not take us to the core of Jesus' Message and purpose, we do not "get it" yet. Not only that, but the parables are open-ended; they leave *us* to tell the ending of the parable by what we do with our own lives. The parable invites us into the story, and the end of the story can only be told by the way we live. How will we invest the pounds – the gifts – that God has given to us? How will we treat the next person

we find lying beaten by the side of the road? Will I forgive the prodigal who I am convinced has squandered my inheritance? And so on – and on and on.

So what about the parable of this great wedding banquet? How can I get into this story? And is there any way my life can take this story on into its proper end? In fact, does this parable match with any of the other teachings and precepts we learn from Jesus?

I suppose I could read this parable and gloat about the invited guests who were too stupid or too evil to accept the invitation to the banquet. We are at the very tail end of Jesus' life on earth. Palm Sunday is over; Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are looming in the immediate future. I do conclude that this parable reflects Jesus' anger toward His countrymen who have claimed to be waiting and praying for hundreds of years for God to send the Messiah – and now, when He makes His bid to be crowned their King, they will not come to the banquet God has invited them to.

But I would never be able to conclude that Jesus tells this parable just so any of us can gloat. By the way, the parable does reflect some details we would not automatically know about Jesus' time and culture. There was no refrigeration of any kind, for instance. There were no cell phones or computers either. So inviting people to a banquet required a two-stage process. First you sent out invitations to all the guests you wanted to invite, warning them that the banquet was being planned and that they should hold themselves in readiness. Once the guests had replied that they would indeed come, then you sent out a second invitation to tell them that the actual banquet was now being prepared and that they should start out for your place. Then you made the final preparations: butchered and dressed out the animals; gathered and cooked the grains; got ready for the guests to arrive. Even so, it might take a day or so for everybody to gather, and if they did not come right away, things would begin to spoil.

Thus, when the invited guests refuse to show up, the king has little time to fool around. They had promised they would come, don't forget. Few of us miss the drama of how the king now invites everyone – “good and bad alike” – to come to the banquet. Nor do we miss the play on words about “many are called but few are chosen,” since now “the chosen” are not willing to show up for the marriage of the king's son.

But this second wave of guests had not been given any warning that they would be invited. How can the king be irate toward the poor fellow who does not have a wedding garment? And since the king is not angry at anybody else, just this one poor fellow, does this not imply that all the other suddenly invited guests, though they did not have any warning either, are all apparently wearing wedding garments?

And why should he be thrown into the outer darkness? I am still embarrassed that it took me so many years to see what I was seeing and to hear what I was hearing. The way this parable matches all of Jesus' teachings is profound, of course – assuming we did not get the other teachings way off base to begin with. Like if we have turned Gehenna – the city garbage dump outside Jerusalem – into Dante's *Inferno*, then we have a teaching Jesus never gave us.

Is this man thrown into Hell? Well, yes, but not the kind of Hell most of us were taught about. This man is thrown into the outer darkness. Why the outer darkness? Because that is where he insists on staying. That is where they found him, and he refuses to come into the great banquet. So he ends up where he insisted on being. Hell is not about hot – it is about lonely. Can you burn a soul with physical fire? We can be too quick to jump from real stories to metaphors, but this is a parable. We have to deal with images and symbols, and hopefully there will be some continuity with our other images and symbols. What is sin? It is “to miss the mark,” literally. Sin is separation, alienation – it is not bad deeds. The bad deeds come from our alienation, our aloneness. Who hates relationships and is always trying to weaken or destroy relationships? This is Satan's top priority. So is it a sin to remain isolated and alone? Bingo!

We do not have to murder or screw somebody to be out of step with God. We can just stay independent, isolated, uncaring, unrelated. This guy without the wedding garment gets thrown into the outer darkness – that is, he is sent back to the loneliness and isolation from which he came. He refuses to receive or accept relationship, love, community. He does not want to be in God's family – in the *ecclesia*. Too much work. Too many imperfect people. It is a rare week when there are no moments in which I start to think that the outer darkness looks pretty good – pretty inviting – at least in comparison to all the demands, interaction, and caring required by authentic relationships.

But what made me miss this parable for years was my not paying attention to the wedding garment. Is there a special wedding garment that everybody wears to a wedding? Of course not. The wedding garment is what the bride wears. It is the wedding dress. Jesus really threw us a curve. I suspect He is still chuckling. This fellow does not want to get married; he does not want that close a relationship; he does not want to say “I do” – not even to the king’s son.

Who is the bride of Christ? The church! I know that. I have been hearing that for many years now. But suddenly I read this parable and cannot remember anything I am supposed to know. This fellow is thrown into the outer darkness because he refuses to get married. He does not want to get closer to Jesus and find himself reconciled to God. He wants to keep his wounds, his resentments, his excuses, his independence. He does not want such an intimate and powerful relationship. He does not want to be the church that is in a love-bond with Jesus – and which is therefore in a love-bond with all the other people he knows who love Jesus.

The king is God, of course. And through marriage to His Son, God is inviting all his children to come together in a family of trust and love so intimate and powerful that its best image is symbolized by the love relationship between a bride and groom.

Erase the distance. Take down the barriers and fears and mistrust that stand between you and God. We have no concept of how powerful and influential God is – if we get really close. It is so incredible, so beautiful, so amazing and full of hope and promise that we can barely stand it.

Yet even as I realize this and know it is true, something inside me also says: “That sounds really scary to me. I don’t know if I can endure that much closeness; that much love; that much intimacy. Maybe it would be better to stay in the outer darkness a little longer.”

Hell is not about hot. It is about aloneness and being lonely – and wanting to stay that way.