

Pastor Roy's Sermon from September 23, 2018

When I read the passages for today, I felt as if I have been preaching on those topics quite a bit and my thoughts returned to the faith questions which I had invited earlier in the summer. Some of your responses I addressed in sermons, others I did not yet. This sermon is the foundation for my thoughts about the others. The topics were the problem of why children suffer, what can we look forward to after we die or how will our experience of eternity be affected by who we are when we die—age, gender, or previous relationships? Another topic was how people who have never been able to hear or understand about faith in Jesus Christ's sacrificial love for us will be judged in eternity. I do apologize that it took so long to address these. I will try to address these by what I say today. My meditation today is more of a foundation, like I said, than a direct answer. Please let me know if my words today raise other questions. I'd be glad to talk 1:1 or address the issues in a future sermon.

Once we move beyond the simplicity and faith filled certainty of our core beliefs, I invite you to consider what I say, but keep in mind that no one knows, nor should they claim to know the answers to all the questions we ask. It's important to be honest and ask lots of questions, but as you know we must sometimes be satisfied with uncertainty or silence when we seek answers to those questions. We must be humble about our answers. At their core, our questions and answers are life giving prayer and when we talk about them, we find fellowship. That might be more important than the answers.

Let's start at the beginning. There are many denominations in the Protestant church and there are many historic geographic orthodox churches, one of them being the Roman Catholic Church, from which all of the Protestant churches came. The core of Christian faith is that the Spirit of God leads us to trust that Jesus Christ is our revelation of **God with us—of God's grace and love**. Various churches use a variety of words to describe trusting and following Jesus Christ, but the essence of discipleship is the same for all of them regardless of the words. Jesus proclaimed love for all and compassion for the least and invites us to a life of prayer where we learn to trust and rest. That's all we need. The Old Testament is the backstory, a context for the faith of the Old Testament people of God, into whom Jesus was born of Mary. The gospels and epistles fill in the details of Jesus as 'God with us' and how the early church understood him.

As we study the Scriptures they do not tell us what **we** want to know about God, faith, and the universe. They proclaim the faith of the writers. We celebrate their faith. We wait in the presence of the God they proclaim; not because we have it all

figured out, but because we are walking in the presence of the God who speaks in many and various ways. The words of Scripture are humble attempts to speak the love and mercy and justice of God. They do not complete the puzzle, they simply invite us into the conversation, into the struggle of faith. And it *is* an ongoing struggle. We must be humble when we speak of our faith and accept the limits of our knowing. Our faith is full of truthful mystery, we must make friends with unknowing, with uncertainty, rather than fearfully replacing it with false substitutes for truth. I'll add those are very personal decisions which no one can make for you.

So let me summarize. Our faith in Christ is the gift of the Spirit, and the most important matter of faith in Christ is God's grace. As a result of God's unconditional love, we can pray honestly, love, and be compassionate. The Bible invites us into the faith filled conversation about God's grace in all our relationships, about love and justice. Our faith is not complicated, it is simple. But as soon as we move from the simplicity of our faith to the complexity of our lives and questions, we find less certainty about the details and have to use our discretion in what we choose and believe.

Clearly the Scriptures are less of an answer book for our specific questions and more a book of conversations and stories which invite us to find our story alongside the others. In other words, the Scriptures are the accepted Christian faith conversation starter.

From time to time questions arise about which parts of the Bible we take literally, and which ones less so? That's an important question. But if we come to the Bible as the conversation *starter* rather than the *end* of the conversation, then the question of what to take literally becomes much less important. So, the Bible is the beginning of the conversation and *our faith* and *faith filled responses* are the end.

Many Christians agree that the goal of Christian faith is about living into the joy of **God with us**, right now--which doesn't end when we die. This is where the grace of God makes so much sense and is full of love and mercy. The Spirit is calling humanity to live in the joy of Christ's love rather than submit to a belief system that will save you in the end. Do you see the difference? The goal of faith is not what comes beyond the grave, but about beginning anew the walk of 'God with us' today, each day, and together as a community of faith. May we do so with courage.