

THE VISION OF FAITH
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: II Corinthians 5: 16 – 21 (NRSV)

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view, even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us, we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

When we talk about the Christian faith we know immediately that every person has his or her own understanding of the meaning of faith. For some people faith is belief and their belief is often dogmatic or doctrinaire. In popular Christian culture this belief is typically summed up in this statement: “Jesus Christ is my Lord and personal savior;” or “Christ died for my sins;” or “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, born of the virgin, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, buried, and on the third day he rose from the dead.” All of these statements of faith and their thousands of variations are orthodox statements of faith. Many Christian churches require such “right belief” if one is to become a member.

My understanding of faith is quite a bit different. I assume that faith is fundamentally a matter of trust. Who or what do you trust? Everybody has some kind of faith, whether they are Christians or Jews, agnostics or atheists, Muslims or Humanists. You cannot live without a modicum of trust. When you lie on the operating table you are placing tremendous trust in your surgeon, anesthetist, and

nurses. When you drive your car you put fundamental trust in the proper mechanical function of the vehicle and you trust that other motorists will follow safe driving habits. When you vote for someone you basically trust that they will represent your views in congress. In fact, our faith in these kinds of matters is so ordinary we take them for granted. No matter what religion you profess, your life presumes trust in people, things, government, and institutions.

The Christian faith takes the matter of trust to a much deeper level for the question is about ultimate trust. Christian faith goes beyond our hope that the knee replacement surgery will get us back on the tennis court or whether our Toyota Camry will actually stop at the red light. Christian faith is expansive in its vision of life and the future of life. Such faith sees the reality of our lives, our communities, and our habitat and casts a longer vision of life that is whole, harmonious, and in right relationship with others. The Christian faith is fundamentally a vision of reconciliation. In a recent essay professor, priest, activist, and monk, W. Paul Jones, wrote:

“It follows that the heart of Christian living is the single-mindedness of an undivided heart, a heart so completely gambling on its vision that nothing makes sense if God does not exist. Faithfulness means living this vision “as if” it were so, in order to make it so – even if, in the eyes of the non-believer, the Christian is risking everything on little more than gossip about rumors... The quality of our life depends upon the profundity of the vision on which we wager. The serious Christian today, then, must attain clarity about what the Christian vision really is, testing its power to evoke the requisite gamble. I have come to the conclusion that this vision has two overlaying dimension: the deeply personal and the expansively cosmic.”¹

Jones goes on to write about a vision of redemption that is personal and universal.

¹ W. Paul Jones. “Inside Out as Upside Down.” *Weavings* XXV. 2 (2010): 7. Print.

My faith is a trust in the vision of human reconciliation by the love and power of God expressed by human hands in human history. I rely upon the life of Jesus and his teachings for my understanding of the love and power of God. I see in his relationships with others, however dimly mirrored in the canon of the New Testament, the Way I can be in relationship with my neighbors. This is the Way of self-sacrifice, respect, and dignity. The Way of the cross is the way of truth, compassion, and justice for every man, woman, and child. I hear in his parables the openness of God's Kingdom to all persons and expect to discover that Kingdom in the miracles of ordinary life. By that I mean the ordinary life we experience in bread and water, table and sickbed, grapes and the lilies of the field. God's grace is as ordinary as mustard greens, lost sheep and found children. My expectation is that the lessons and wisdom that he shared, such as the Sermon on the Mount, will bring peace and wholeness to all human beings long before nations and United Nations gather the political courage to beat their swords into plowshares. This is the kind of new creation and new creature that Paul wrote about in his letter to Corinth.

This is the vision of faith that I put my trust in. I know that in the minds of many Christians my faith is not worthy of the name Christian. They are welcome to that opinion but that does not concern me anymore. I cannot justify myself. And in the end we are all reconciled to God, not by orthodoxy, but by God's love that flows through our hearts and hands, doing the work of renewal and reconciliation. And yes, Glen Beck, God's justice is social justice. And as faulty as it may be, when the church attempts to create social, political, and economic justice it is the ministry of Jesus Christ.

You may have heard Mr. Beck declare on March 3rd that people should leave their church if that church affirms the ministry of social justice. As David Sessions reports in *Politics Daily*, Beck said:

“I'm begging you, your right to religion and freedom to exercise religion and read all of the passages of the Bible as you want to read them and as your church wants to preach them . . . are going to come under the ropes in the next year. If it lasts that long it will be the next year. I beg you, look for the words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!”

Later, Beck [held up cards](#), one with a hammer and sickle and other with a swastika. "Communists are on the left, and the Nazis are on the right. That's what people say. But they both subscribe to one philosophy, and they flew one banner. . . . But on each banner, read the words, here in America: 'social justice.' They talked about economic justice, rights of the workers, redistribution of wealth, and surprisingly, democracy.”²

Mr. Beck is condemning nearly every mainline church, the emergent church, increasing numbers of evangelical churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and most congregations whose members are minorities. His condemnation reaches out to many Jewish congregations. More importantly, maybe Mr. Beck ought to quit reading church websites and start reading the Bible. He could begin with Psalm 33 that declares that the Lord loves righteousness and justice. There he will find nearly 2000 verses related to poverty, the poor, and the just distribution of wealth. Perhaps he should study the Biblical concept of the “Year of the Jubilee.” And if he concludes that the major theme of the Bible is God’s justice, then perhaps, indeed, God and Jesus Christ are fascists and communists.

² David Sessions, “Glen Beck Urges Listeners to Leave Churches that Preach Social Justice, *Politics Dailey*, at www.politicsdaily.com/2010/03/08/glen-beck-urges-listners-to-leave-churches-that-preach-social-justice/html, 3.8 (2010): Web.

The Old Testament prophet said it so succinctly, “Where there is no vision the people perish.” (Proverbs 29:18a) If we cannot see the image of human beings serving one another we cannot possibly hope to see Paradise. If we cannot imagine just and compassionate relationships with one another our place in the Kingdom of God is vaporous. Our faith dissolves into nonsense if it cannot envision God’s shalom for every human being. My faith would be vacuous if it did not marvel at the splendor of the creation her powers of life and death, birth and volcano, evolution and diversity. And with that marvel comes the stewardship of all of her resources.

That is my vision of faith. It is in-corpore, in by body and being. It may only be a pale reflection of God’s greater design or the power of life beyond this world. But it is the faith that sustains me. It is the vision of God that propels me to follow in the footsteps of the Fisherman.

I understand that this vision is not perfect. God mocks my simple notions. It is certainly not a vision that I expect to ever be fulfilled in my lifetime. But I do also believe that as impartial and even as impractical as it may be, I trust it is also of the Creator. I have confidence that it is of Sacred musing and carries a value beyond my limitations. How my faith is implemented in my life and world are problematic and face tremendous social, economic, and political challenges. But in the end, I trust that God’s justice will bring peace and reconciliation to all of the earth. That is not only my hope, it is also my moral compass and expectation.

I cannot trust those visions of the future that place credibility in violent means, whether it is a jihad by Muslim extremists or actions by the newly emerging “state militias.” The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that the number of hate groups has risen 54% since 2000. I know that many people are frustrated and angry over a number of issues ranging from taxes to health care to immigration. But can anyone honestly believe that we will resolve these challenges by intimidation, vitriolic rhetoric, hatred, and violence? Maybe that is the faith vision of some, but such a vision is not found in the Kingdom of God; nor can any Christian claim the gospel of Jesus Christ under the sheets of the Ku Klux Klan. You may pray in the name of Jesus, wear a cross, carry a Bible, and attend church every Sunday but those are not essential to the Kingdom of God. You can be born again, fire baptized, and slain in the Spirit but if you hold contempt for other persons, if your actions violate another person, if your politics harm another person, if your policies rob people of their dignity, and your economic practices impoverish people and denude the earth you are Christian in name only and cannot claim the body of Christ.

I realize that this may sound confrontational. But if people like Mr. Beck are going to attack the church and the very gospel of Jesus Christ, I feel compelled to stand and proclaim what I understand to be the truth about that gospel. Yes, I am just one man with a small audience. I do not have the reach of national television. I do not have the wealth that sustains such personalities and their programs. But I do have the truth, as I understand it – as God has given me the light to see it. What I know about the truth is that it cannot be

compromised in the name of patriotism, political party, gender, race, or economic theory.

I do not presume that the church should dictate social and economic policies. The idea of clergy telling their congregants whom to vote for is appalling to me. When the church ventures to influence legislation we must do so with fear and trembling. Dr. King declared, “The church is not the master of the state, nor the servant of the state, but the conscience of the state.” In my mind it means the church holds forth the vision of justice and peace. The church lifts up the poor and widowed, the orphaned, the halt, and the lame. The church keeps the vigil of human freedom and dignity, insisting that every person stands equally before the law of mankind and the love of God. When Jesus began his ministry he read to the synagogue these words of the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”
Luke 4: 18-19

That was the vision that carried Jesus from Nazareth to Golgotha and beyond. I believe it is the vision that will carry the church into the future.

Right now every one is talking about the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, the Libertarian Party, the Tea Party, and the Coffee Party. Some are holding out for the Martini Party. May I humbly propose that the Christian church host the Kingdom Party, where every one is invited, all are

welcome. Their burdens are shared burdens, their joys our joys, their failures ours to carry, the grief our pain, and victories our celebrations. Let the church be the true body of Christ, where in the words of James Weldon Johnson we will:

Lift every voice and sing,
 'Til earth and heaven ring,
 Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
 Let our rejoicing rise
 High as the listening skies,
 Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
 Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
 Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
 Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
 Let us march on 'til victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
 Bitter the chast'ning rod,
 Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
 Yet with a steady beat,
 Have not our weary feet
 Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
 We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
 We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
 Out from the gloomy past,
 'Til now we stand at last
 Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
 God of our silent tears,
 Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
 Thou who has by Thy might
 Led us into the light,
 Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
 Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
 Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
 Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
 May we forever stand,
 True to our God,
 True to our native land.

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