

"FAITH AT FIFTY"
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*To have faith is to perceive the wonder that is here,
and to be stirred by the desire to integrate the self
into the holy order of living.*

*Faith does not spring out of nothing.
It comes with the discovery of the holy dimension
of our existence.*

*We live by the certainty that we are not as
dust in the wind, that our life is related to the
ultimate, the meaning of all things.*

*Faith does not detach one from thinking,
it does not suspend reason.*

*It is not opposed to knowledge, but to
indifferent aloofness to the essence of being.*

*Faith means to hold small things great,
to take light matters seriously,
to distinguish the common and the passing
from the aspect of the everlasting.*

*Our task is to act, not only to enjoy;
to change, not only to accept;
to augment, not only to discover the glory of God.*

REVEREND FENTON

His name was Rev. Fenton and he was pastor at Faith Evangelical United Brethren Church, the congregation to which my mother dragged me, kicking and screaming, most Sundays. He was young, quick with disarming humor and, as my mother said more than once, God's own handsome man. I liked the guy. I even trusted him. Whatever I knew about religious faith was contained in this man who knew God on a first-name basis, yet could make people laugh.

Rev. Fenton called on his flock in the 1966 Appalachian tradition: regularly and without notice. Hard as it may be to believe in these harried times, folks thought nothing of setting an extra place for lunch or dinner, especially when the guest was their pastor. So it was that Rev. Fenton called on us one deathly hot August evening.

Now, my dad was not known to drink much beer (he was a Seagram's and Seven man until the day he died) but he did keep a few bottles of Blatz beer in the refrigerator come summer; according to him, cold beer was God's way of rewarding a fellow for putting up hay or cleaning fence rows. And who was he to question God?

Back to Rev. Fenton's unannounced pastoral call, Dad and his buddy Ed were sweating and swearing their way through the installation of a new well pump. (Dense humidity, ninety-five degree temperatures and deer flies do not a prayer meeting make!) My assignment in this Herculean undertaking was to keep Dad and Ed in cold beer, thus my many trips between the house (trailer) and pump shed.

It was on my third or fourth trip that I spotted Brother Fenton's car in the gravel driveway and froze. My old man, despite his own predilection for whiskey, had made it clear that churches and beer were to be kept separate – a judgment reinforced regularly at Faith Evangelical United Brethren Church. But Dad and Ed were not to be kept waiting. What to do about the preacher? He'd be sitting not four feet from the door and barely ten from the fridge! How does a ten-year-old smuggle two cold bottles of Blatz past a man of faith?

As I plucked up my courage and entered the room, my mom was telling our preacher about how the pump had given out last night. Yes, it was a blessing from God that Ed was able to help in such awful heat. Getting my bearings on the conversation, I set in motion my plan. I greeted Rev. Fenton, chatted him up a little, then made for my tiny trailer bedroom to get the bulkiest article of clothing I owned: one of those red plaid, woolen coats made for Arctic expeditions and children whose mothers still believed that chest colds were caused by wet socks. I could, I thought to myself, hide those beers under such a gigantic coat. But I need to invent a guise, a ruse.

Mom and Parson Fenton laughed aloud when I walked past them to the kitchen. When my mother asked why in blue blazes I was wearing my winter coat in August, I confidently replied that my baseball coach had told every member of the team to wear extra clothes now and then, just to get us ready for playing in the heat. Before she could say anything else I hid behind the open refrigerator door, deftly slipped two beer bottles into the side pockets of my coat and, sure that my plan had prevailed, closed the door. It was as I took my first step that I tripped over a floor register, causing me to fall on my side, that I heard the beer bottle clank against that pocket knife I'd been looking for since May – a shrill, deafening sound with the timbre of Big Ben at high noon! My mother, evidently too embarrassed to even inquire after me, watched in horror as her pastor came to my aid only to find not one, but, two, bottles of Blatz in my pockets.

Helping me up, Rev. Fenton smiled and allowed as how it was a mighty hot day, now, wasn't it?

That's a silly story. No deep insight, no moral lesson. Except that, well, that's the first time it occurred to me that religious faith might not be what some people thought and taught. If someone of Rev. Fenton's character could give a kid a pass on smuggling beer on a hot day, maybe, just maybe, being *faithful* was not the exclusive property of the proud and the pious. And that's why I told you that silly story, that's why I began with the quote from Hillel: to suggest that faith is the lifelong quest to see in our sacred moments the Surprise, the Fire, the sense of wonder and connection some call God. My premise here is that faith, as described in liberal religious circles, refers to our willingness to appreciate momentary magic.

STAGE FIVE FAITH

As most of you know, I turned fifty last week. Overall, I've treated it as a number and not a big deal. But I've also begun experiencing that process we call life review – that introspective look at our lives to date. I'd like to use this growing sense of life review to talk about the role of faith in our lives, describing faith as something more than pride or piety. I mean to invite you to consider faith as a viable way of talking about what is *trustworthy*, that which has been passed through the fire our everyday lives and been found to be true, if only for ourselves. So let's talk about faith at fifty.

You'll recall that in previous sermons I've been influenced by the work of James Fowler, more particularly his stage theory of faith development. For Fowler, faith development can be thought of in the same way Piaget and Kohlberg thought about physical and psychological development. The theory does not ask us to locate ourselves on some "perfect" scale according to some "perfect" notion of growth, rather, it's to point up the fact that many of us experience over time profound changes in our beliefs. Thus it is that Fowler suggests his six stages of faith. Given that I want to talk about faith and what it looks like at age fifty, I'm going to draw your attention to his fifth stage, what he calls "Conjunctive Faith".

Fowler says that Stage Five faith owes much to the four that preceded it. Stage One (Intuitive-Projective Faith) taught us imagination and life beyond logic. Stage Two (Mythic-Literal Faith) introduced us to symbols and rituals that were one-dimensional: they meant whatever we interpreted them to mean. Stage Three (Synthetic-Conventional Faith) saw us, sometime in adolescence, casting our lot with a certain group, be it family, religion or tribe. It was in this stage that we began to define others as not belonging to our group, causing us to look on them with suspicion, pity or scorn. Stage Four (Individuative-Reflective Faith) brought us great indecision and anxiety, for it was there that we found that our old answers were not sufficient for our new questions. We likely withdrew from Stage Three's group, perhaps only emotionally at first. We became aware of ourselves as never before, eschewing our former beliefs and coming to terms with our own responsibility for new ones.

Laying aside Fowler's Stage Six (Universalizing Faith) for those incredible souls who transcend ego and achieve what the Eastern traditions call enlightenment, I want to focus on Stage Five, Conjunctive Faith.

An Internet source describes Stage Five this way:

...In this stage a person grasps the reality behind the symbols of his or her inherited systems, and is also drawn to...the symbols of others' systems. This stage makes room for mystery and the unconscious, and is fascinated by it while at the same time apprehensive of its power...In Stage Five, the world, demythologized in Stage Four, is re-sacrilized, literally brimming with vision. It is also imbued with a sense of justice that goes beyond justice defined by one's own culture and people. Because one has begun to see "the bigger picture" the walls and tradition have built between ourselves and others begin to erode. It is not easy to live on the cusp of paradox, and due to its radical drive towards inclusivity, the mind struggles to assimilate and integrate faster than it can work through its cultural and psychological baggage. It is an overwhelming, ecstatic stage in which one is radically opened to possibility and wonder.

There is a sense of surrender inherent to Stage Five Faith, a surrender to the idea that something is at work in our lives that is beyond words and symbols. Stage Four Faith is too bitter, too busy negating the old forms to dare something so radical as embracing life's complexity. But not Stage Five Faith. It's here that we can

accept the fact that at least we know that we don't know! It's here that the worst of our personal struggles for absolute clarity and purity can be released. It's here that we enter into camaraderie with human dignity, simply because others have helped us obtain some measure of dignity for ourselves. Stage Five Faith, in short, is about accepting our limitations in light of our mortality, then spinning ourselves out into the world anyway.

FAITH AT FIFTY

For all my reading in and experiences with other religious traditions, I am still drawn to the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The stories are seemingly imprinted in my brain, so when I come across a new slant on an old biblical story, my day is made. In the November 29, 2004 issue of *Newsweek*, Rabbi Niles Goldstein feels as though he were lost in a time warp as he traversed Mongolia with a nomadic band. It was on that trip that he was able to imagine what life might have been like for the ancient Hebrews as they wandered from desert to desert.

Goldstein notes that in Abraham and Sarah's time it was the patriarch who was to lead the way in extending hospitality to strangers. Citing a passage in Genesis, Goldstein updates the message by saying that Abraham and Sarah practiced an "open tent" policy; they understood – not coincidentally, at mid-life – that connection and community are the antidote for exclusion, estrangement and even war.

But the author doesn't leave it at a nice twist on an old story. He goes on to say:

"...Abraham's tent was exposed to every direction – it was welcoming, but it made him vulnerable. That is precisely the point – it is only through vulnerability that genuine community can emerge, that commitment and compassion become intertwined and inseparable. Both require a risk on our part, and both necessitate that we make a leap of faith..."

For this baby boomer, faith at fifty entails the paradox of being open at the risk of vulnerability. Open to change and vulnerable to chaos. Open to difference and vulnerable to rejection. Open to authenticity and vulnerable to misunderstanding. Open to risk and vulnerable to pain. Rabbi Goldstein's take on nomadic hospitality is a wonderful metaphor for the kind of faith that is assertive enough to serve both self and others, a faith that makes value judgments but only after serious discernment and always with room for healthy doubt.

Faith at fifty is about paradox. It was the philosopher, Camus, who, at middle-age, offered a life review that resonates with me:

To correct a natural indifference, I was placed halfway between misery and the sun. Misery kept me from believing that all was well under the sun, and the sun taught me that misery wasn't everything.

Misery and sunshine. Like you, like everyone who lives half a century, my life's misery and sunshine have been the grist for my faith. I was shaped by adoption, poverty, Appalachian culture, sexual abuse, depression and troubled relationships. But I was also shaped by nature, religion, music, sports, education, mentors and resilience. Like Camus, I'm willing to bet that my own indifference to self and others required that I be placed midway between misery and sunshine.

Camus explains the source of my faith but not the content, leaving unanswered still the question of what constitutes my faith. Here's the short version:

- I believe God is code for our experience of that which animates all life and eludes our understanding
- I believe Jesus, as best we can tell from historical sources and modern insight, sided with the outcast and preached an inner transformation that would facilitate an outer reformation
- I believe we are born of Mystery and return to Mystery when we die
- I believe children enter this world free from the taint of sin, and thus require no ritual, blessing or forgiveness to be whole and good
- I believe evil is taking from another – another person, nation or even the environment – that which is not ours to take

- I believe ancient scripture is but one source of wisdom; tradition, reason and experience are likewise lamps unto our feet
- I believe the good life is about honor, work, family, friends and laughter
- I believe the effective minister is the one that leads without diminishing the gifts and calling of others
- I believe the effective religious community is the one that exists to live love and serve justice
- I believe the Cleveland Indians and the Cincinnati Reds will meet in the World Series before I die

Okay, the last one's a bit much, but you can't fault me for reaching for the stars, now, can you?

Back to my introduction, Rev. Fenton parted the curtain of faith for me when he modeled the idea that faith is not a yes/no, either/or feature of the human condition. I took from that long ago encounter the notion that faith can be – perhaps *ought* to be – a partial, not total trust in anything. Pray all you want, perform your rituals, pontificate the way the world ought to be, meditate until you can stand to be in the same room as Pat Robertson, and still, *nothing and no one will save you but love*. And even love must be received on its own terms: mere moments, passing blessings and fleeting glances.

Faith in the magic moments may not be enough for some – a natural longing for more and more that would certainly explain chemical

addiction, rabid capitalism and Yankee fans – but by age fifty, it seems to me that a body ought not be so needy and greedy as in former days. It seems to me that the wisdom to celebrate the magic moments is worth the skin tags, spider veins and colonoscopies. It seems to me that mid-life is the point at which we may rightfully say that our lives are truly our own.

So, bless us, God of the baby boomers, as we do our best to act like spiritual grownups. Let our faith, partial though it is in the wake of Vietnam, Watergate, Disco and George Steinbrenner, be enough.

Amen.