

CONFIRMATION – MONTHLY MEETING

Sunday, March 7, 2010

Session 7 – Notes

Belief and Doubt

Having doubts and frustrations about one's faith journey is not the same as having a lack of belief or a lack of faith. Belief is one of the most passionately contested and most misunderstood parts of the Christian journey. People often make judgments about the spiritual credibility of themselves and others based on what they "believe." Likewise, there seem to be categories of people that emerge as in or out of God's favor because they do or do not believe the "right" things.

Most of the time belief is understood to be a condition of the mind, such that if I believe in God I think certain things about God are true. And if it is assumed that going to heaven or hell after one dies is dependent upon how one believes or thinks about God then there will be much pressure to think correctly.

At Walnut Hills we consider belief in another way. Belief has less to do with what we think about and more to do with what we give our hearts to. What and who do we love? What is it that transforms our lives? We may not know what we think about God, we may not know if God is responsible for this or that, but we may love with all our heart what the world can become because of a loving God. We also don't understand belief as a requirement for God to love us in this life and after we die. God's love and acceptance of us is not dependent upon what we believe about God; God's love and acceptance of us comes about because God believes in us no matter what.

Born Again

The origin of this term is from a story featuring Jesus and a religious leader named Nicodemus (John 3:1-21). Nicodemus is struggling with his spiritual journey and he asks Jesus how he can achieve eternal life, to which Jesus replies that he must be born again. Nicodemus immediately thinks this is a literal directive and he tells Jesus it is foolish to think one can re-enter one's mother's womb. The story doesn't say it but it is also foolish to think that we re-enter the simplistic way of thinking that characterizes our earlier spiritual journeys. Being born again simply refers to those inner transformations and insights that help us to be the people God has called us to be. It's less like becoming childlike and more like maturing and getting back on a healthy, spiritually sound path. At Walnut Hills we believe Jesus calls us to a path of

welcome, of service, of inclusiveness of all faiths, of social justice, of deep attention to the spiritual journey.

The Kingdom of God

Jesus talks a lot about the “kingdom of God.” In some places the phrase “kingdom of heaven” is used. It is the same thing. But it doesn’t refer to heaven as being the place where we go when we die. The kingdom of God is something else. Jesus was always clear that his mission had to do with creating a world where people gave their allegiance only to a way of life that came from God. That way of life was focused on love, compassion, justice (especially for those put down by society) and hope. Nothing else mattered – not money, not power, not prestige. Religions were supposed to operate this way, nations were supposed to function to serve others, the world was supposed to be re-created because of love and compassion. A society that functioned entirely with this vision Jesus referred to as the kingdom of God. Just as being born again is a personal transformation, so the kingdom of God is a transformation of society. Both are necessary – both are at the heart of Jesus’ message.

Jesus and Homosexuality

Unfortunately throughout the years the church has had to struggle with issues affecting the worth of people as they are. There was an ugly time in our past when some parts of the church honestly believed it was OK for some people to own slaves. One of the reasons slavery wasn’t completely challenged as abhorrent was because there are parts of the Bible where slavery is clearly accepted. A literal understanding of the Bible makes these horrendous mistakes possible. It was only when people began to realize that God’s voice is compromised when human words and ideas are passed off as divine and holy.

We continue to experience this kind of danger with homosexual persons. In many churches gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are considered sinful because of their “choices.” There is great disagreement in Christianity about how to consider persons of sexual orientations other than heterosexual. The clearly prevailing scientific opinion is that people do not “choose” their sexual orientation. You don’t choose to be gay or straight. You are who you are. What all of us choose, whether we are gay or straight, is how to behave sexually. The United Methodist Church has not yet come to a place where we accept persons of all sexual orientations as they are. Our official stance is that “the United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” (2004 *Book of Discipline* Para. 161G). Additionally, UMC clergy are

forbidden from performing same sex union ceremonies or marriages and our denomination refuses to ordain openly gay clergy even if they are in committed, life-long partnerships.

At Walnut Hills you will find evidence of the same divisions. We have members with diverse opinions and understandings. In November of 2009 we voted to become a Reconciling Congregation, thereby going on record as accepting all persons equally, regardless of their sexual orientation. In the past we have hosted a group known as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). And I am on record as being clear that I believe it is because of a literal and incorrect interpretation of the Bible that Christianity has been able to treat homosexual persons without the love, dignity and compassion that Jesus requires.

Part of the importance of being confirmed is continuing to be open to change as your spiritual journey matures. Are you open to all people compassionately even if you think differently than others in your church or your denomination? There will come a time when homosexual persons will probably be more accepted and included than they are now. But another group of persons will come along who will be hated for some other reason and someone will find a Biblical interpretation to support that hate. Spiritually mature persons look for ways to remove barriers that separate people.

By the way, none of the few Biblical passages critical of homosexuality come from Jesus.

Jesus and War

One of the truly horrible realities about human life is that we have been unsuccessful in dealing with our differences without resorting to war. Currently our country is engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States is split on how these wars started and what to do about them. The Christian faith is split on how to speak out about these and other wars. Just to talk about war from a faith perspective can lead to arguments about patriotism, democracy, terrorism, support for women and men in the military, etc.

It's important to remember that when Jesus was on earth his small nation was occupied by a large imperial power – Rome. Rome could and did terrorize people all the time. Jesus never encouraged people to overthrow Rome with violence. He never encouraged military force at all. What he did was to say that love was the only way to be a part of the kingdom of God. He taught that we are to love everybody, including our enemies. To do that was to be willing to sacrifice from time to time. But if people want a different world people have to follow a different pathway. War will

never accomplish that. If you don't believe it, ask someone fighting a war if they are glad that war is being waged. Often they will speak about the horrors of war, and even if they feel their participation has been necessary they will recall with real pain what war does to people engaged in it. Violence from the past just seems to create violence in the future. The real issue with war is how the human community deals with differences, evil, greed, power, etc. Jesus' teaching is that when the Kingdom of God is lived out war becomes irrelevant and unnecessary. Jesus was not naïve; Jesus had a much larger, more loving vision for how humanity could live together. The responsibility for ending war is not in the hands of those in uniform, which is why we respect and care for those who are in the military. The responsibility for ending war is with every single human being who must decide how he or she is going to deal with conflict and division.

Cults

There is no doubt that cults are real. There is no doubt that groups surround charismatic individuals who can be very persuasive in getting impressionable individuals to follow them. Sometimes these leaders are merely annoying and other times they are diabolical and dangerous.

The best way to guard yourselves against becoming involved in a group that can negatively change your heart and cause you to make decisions you would never make otherwise is to be very involved in your spiritual journey. Following Jesus is a lifetime journey. Study, conversation and a healthy church community are essential. When you know where you are trying to go you are less likely to be encouraged to go a direction you don't really want to go.