

Genesis 18:1-15; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8
The Third Sunday after Pentecost A; 06.18.23; G. Miles Smith+

I want to talk a little bit today...about *faith...and where it comes from*.

I want to talk about faith on this Father's Day when I'm thinking about my father (and mother)...and thinking about my son...and also soon becoming a grandfather.

Also, I'm thinking about faith on this day before Juneteenth, a holiday especially dear to the black churches in our community and across the nation, a holiday commemorating the end of slavery in America. It is one of the vexing things about Christianity in America that faith played a role in both justifying slavery and opposing it, in both traumatizing enslaved persons and giving them their own faith in God to be able to live and survive slavery. How can faith be on *both* sides of that?

So I'm going to talk about three things:

1. Faith comes to us through other people.

I know that a lot of the reason I have a faith is because of *my parents*. They clearly agreed with each other in taking my sisters and I to church regularly. And they didn't seem to do it as some kind of grudging obligation—but they wanted to be there. They appreciated our ministers, they were reverent and serious in worship, they gave money and they volunteered, they had friends at church, and they'd stay and visit with everybody quite a while after church—even without anything like a “coffee hour”. I know this because I witnessed it, albeit sometimes against my will. :) *Neither* of my parents *talked* about their faith at home—they just didn't talk about things like that. I don't remember any conversations with my father about faith until I began college religious studies and then later as an ordained minister. So they rarely ever talked about faith—but they did *signal* their faith to me...by their devotion to and respect for church. *And by their love*.

I don't know if all the signaling--by their devotion and respect for church—would have helped me to come to faith, however, if I had not had the fundamental sense that they loved me. And they did, even though there were some confusing times in the 60's and 70's, for example! But they didn't talk about *love* anymore than they talked about faith. But I could tell by how they tried to take care of us.

Faith and love need each other. If I had not had parents like I had who signaled both to me, then I would have needed someone else to have signaled faith and love to me. And maybe that would have been hard and taken a long time. But fortunately, even beyond my parents, there *were* others who both *signaled* faith and love to me but also others who could *talk* it. And that helped the faith that my parents signaled to me in the beginning to be able to grow in different directions as I got older. After all, there are families of *origin*—and there can also be families of *choice*.

So, when Jesus and the disciples were moving around and meeting lots of people as described in the gospel lesson...talking to them, teaching them, helping them—and basically showing them compassion—then they were giving those people opportunities *to come to their own faith and love*. Faith comes to us through other people.

2. Faith comes to us from God.

The story of Abraham is one of the foundational stories of the Old Testament which is still picked up in the New Testament where Abraham remains an exemplar of faith. And yet his story was different from what I was just describing. Abraham's faith did *not* come through other people. His faith, as told in last Sunday's lessons, came from a direct revelation from God. So there is this reality too—and this is important. Yes, faith is *harder* to come to if you don't have others who have faith and love *with* you—but *there is still the divine side of things*. And even when we have received good signals on faith from others, there still come times when we need to have our own experience of faith, deciding if we can trust what we have

received. And these can come from moments of divine revelation that can confirm our faith. Of course, we do have to check ourselves and make sure that we aren't just talking to ourselves and trying to talk ourselves into something. :) We know there is the potential for self-deception when it comes to spiritual matters or anything else. *But there is also the true potential for God to get through to us in utterly surprising moments* that, often enough, we don't even know how to talk about afterwards. Faith comes to us from God.

3. Faith is more than us.

Juneteenth, not to mention the whole American experience of slavery, and the way faith gets coopted over and over again to serve various political interests, is all a reminder that faith is a fragile thing on our side. Faith is fragile because it can get hijacked to serve personal interests without our even realizing it. Faith can be desecrated by people who do hurtful things with their faith. There's that whole shadow side to faith.

But faith--even when faith is compromised--is also connected to a God who is going to relentlessly keep messing with us. :) Even when our faith is messed up somewhere, God can manage to pull something good out of it, even if despite ourselves. As the apostle Paul understood so well, faith is ultimately not about us, and what we can or cannot do. Faith is possible in the first place "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5). Or as it is said in 1 John 4:10: It is not that we first loved God, but that God first loved us... Faith is more than us.

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I hope something I've said here rings true to you in your experience of your life.

And if it doesn't quite, then consider the possibility that it doesn't quite...*yet*.

There is more time. There are more people you may meet...who may make the difference. There are surprises you may yet encounter...in utterly private moments yet to come.