

## Love And Do What You Will

There's no doubt that much of our faith can be confusing, difficult, esoteric and even contentious.

We have Christians of every stripe and belief.

Ranging from the conservative evangelicals who insist that dinosaurs and people roamed the earth together (because, they argue, the earth is less than 5000 years old).

To the Amish who live among us, but not with us.

To the broad tents of the Episcopal Church that seeks ever more inclusion.

Just last week on one of the evangelical radio stations, there were two pastors doing their best to debunk carbon dating: a process used to date ancient bones and plant life.

These pastors explained how a fundamentalist scientist (isn't that an oxymoron?) put silica on some recent bones, and sent them off to a lab for carbon dating.

Silica, the pastors chuckled, can skew accurate carbon dating.

No one told the lab that got the bones about the silica contamination.

And the pastors laughed for days when the carbon dating came back saying the bones were much older than they actually were.

"See that, carbon dating doesn't work!"

On the other hand, the genius of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein, says:

“The human mind isn’t capable of grasping the Universe.

We are like a little child entering a huge library.

The walls are covered to the ceilings with books in many different tongues.

The child knows that someone must have written these books.

But the child doesn’t know who or how.

The child doesn’t understand the languages in which they are written.

But the child perceives a definite plan in how the books are arranged.

There is a mysterious order which the child doesn’t comprehend, but only dimly suspects.”

Perhaps because we are in the midst of so many trees, today’s gospel brings us to that high place where we can see the forest itself.

Like us, the Jewish people have a knack for complicating matters of faith.

Probably because it’s so much easier to debate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin than it is to love.

So today, scripture reminds us yet again of what is essential in our faith.

The heart of our faith is simply this.

Love.

Love of God.

Love of neighbor.

Love of enemies.

And love of self.

Which is why we so often remember this wisdom from St Augustine:

“Love, and do what you will.”

Here's the thing about love:

We love only because we are first loved by God.

Who, according to the wonderful imagination of the author of Genesis, takes some clay, molds it, and breathes the breath of life into it.

And here we are.

Creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

It is God who initiates creation.

And it is God who initiates love.

Love doesn't start with us.

It doesn't end with us.

It doesn't even depend on us.

Love is, from the very start, a gift to us.

And yet in our hyper-individualized society, the cultural message is often:

"You're on your own!"

"You make or break your own destiny!"

How many people are crushed by that false understanding of reality?

Tune in to Joel Osteen any evening and you'll hear all about how, if **you** just make **you** better, then your life will be just peachy!

That iconic Bill Murray movie of some 30 years ago, Ground Hog Day, makes the same point.

There's Bill Murray, a cynical, angry weatherman, who is on the world's worst assignment.

Hanging around a cold Pennsylvania podunk town waiting to see if a groundhog will see its shadow.

He goes to bed that night and wakes up to Sonny and Cher's "I got you babe," as he goes through his day, a grouch and a creep.

The next morning comes.

Same song.

Same day.

Same people.

Same grouch.

Day in and day out — he relives the same day.

And even when he commits suicide or crimes, he still wakes up to the same day.

Ready to rerun it over and again.

It's only when he starts shaping up, by being kind to people, noticing other people, that he finally wakes up out of his hell of repetition.

A Joel Osteen success story if there ever was one!

The only problem with Rev. Osteen (and that movie) is that self-improvement directed by yours truly is not what our faith is about.

And that's what Jesus is calling us in close to see.

Love doesn't begin with us.

It doesn't end with us.

Love begins and ends with God.

And long before we can ever be givers of love, we are first and foremost its' recipients.

Because while we often think that it is we who are pursuing God, the whole story of salvation, from Genesis to Revelation and everything in between, is pointing to and shouting out and cajoling us to open our eyes to see this undeniable fact:

It is always and everywhere God who is pursuing us.

God's pursuit of us doesn't depend on our goodness, decency or merit.

God's pursuit of us is quite simply the very essence of God's relationship with us, from the beginning of time until its end.

From the ancient Israelites being freed from slavery in Egypt, to God sending prophets and holy women to his people, calling them home.

To the angel visiting Mary.

To the incarnation of God in Jesus.

To the gift at Pentecost of the Holy Spirit.

That same Spirit is alive and moving!

Transforming the world, even today!

The whole story of salvation is not about us seeking God, but about God seeking us!

A priest spent years with the Masai people of Kenya.

The Masai are a people who walk vast distances, herding their cattle.

As that priest travelled with and among the Masai people, he recounts the night when the elder he became friends with discovered that he himself was being pursued by God.

It began as a conversation about the Swahili word for "belief."

The elder said that the word chosen by the priest is the wrong word.

The Swahili word that the priest chose means "to agree."

And that word, the elder explains, 'is something like a white hunter shooting an animal with his high-powered rifle from a great distance.

Only his eyes and fingers are involved in the action.'

'Instead,' the elder continues, 'true belief is more like a lion going out to hunt.

His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey.

His legs provide the speed to catch it.

And all the power in his body is involved in the terrible death leap.

In the single blow to the neck with the front paw.

The blow that kills.

As the prey goes down, the lion envelopes it in his arms.

Pulls it to himself.

And makes it part of himself.

This is the way a lion kills.

This is the way of those who truly grasp faith.

This is belief.'

The priest looks at the elder in utter amazement.

But the old man isn't done yet.

'We did not search you out, Padre,' he says to the priest.

'We did not even want you to come to us.

And yet you followed us.

Away from your house into the bush.

Into the plains.

Into the steppes where our cattle are.

You told us of the High God.

How we must search for him.



Even leave our land and our people to find him.

But we have not done this.

We have not left our land.

We have not searched for **him**.

**He** has searched for us.

He has searched **us** out.

He has found us.

All the time, we think – we are the lion.

But in truth, the lion is God.” V. Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered, 48, paraphrased.

What is the heart of our faith?

It is simply this.

That before we were, God is.

And because God is, you are loved.

Now.

And forever.

+amen.