

## Why Faith?

What is the function of religion?

What is the function of religious faith?

Some will say religion is to comfort us, especially in life's most difficult moments.

Others see religion as a set of rules to follow, and if we do so, there is a reward waiting at the end.

Still others see religion as a social network where likeminded people can enjoy each other's company and do good things in the wider community.

Of course, Karl Marx called religion the opiate of the masses.

Sigmund Freud said:

"Religion is a system of wishful illusions together with a disavowal of reality, such as we find nowhere else but in a state of blissful hallucinatory confusion. Religion's eleventh commandment is "Thou shalt not question."

I like Freud's line best because it brings front and center the central question in religious faith: what *is* reality, what is the *nature* of reality?

And, I suggest, that at the end of the day, if we stop in our journey and accept religion merely as a place to find comfort, merely as a place where clear rules of conduct are laid out, merely as a place for companionship and likeminded fellowship – then we are probably no further along in our journey to experience the Really Real than Freud was.

Jesus compares the Really Real, which he names the Kingdom of God, to a mustard seed – a tiny seed that blooms not into a tree, but into a weed that takes over the entire garden.

Jesus compares the Really Real to yeast, whose tiny specks, once mixed into dough, cause the dough to grow and expand and rise.

Jesus compares the Really Real to salt; just a little changes the taste of everything.

Things tiny, things insignificant, become the open window through which we might glimpse, if even for a moment, that which is Really Real.

Ever since the Enlightenment, the trend has been to define reality by what we can physically touch and describe with our five senses.

And yet, even hard science has come to understand that reality is far more mysterious than the observable universe: with quantum physics discovering matter that exists in two places at once, that mere observation changes the nature of an object, that perhaps the most basic ingredients making up the universe are vibrating strings: suggesting that all of creation, in its essence, is music.

You sense it sometimes,  
don't you,  
in the tingling that comes while gazing at a confoundingly  
beautiful sunset;  
or  
in the delightful wonder of a small child seeing her first snowfall;  
or  
in those brief instants where life's confusion suddenly is lifted,  
and insight given,  
when  
what seems to be meaningless suffering  
takes on meaning,

where  
the grace of God alights,  
if only for a moment,  
in the palm of your  
hand?

The Gospel of Luke this morning begins with this effort to crack us out of what *seems* to be real so we might begin to develop the eyes to see what is Really Real.

He begins by getting us off our couches and dragging us into the desert – where we are confronted not with a handsome preacher in a smartly pressed shirt and tie, but by a bearded, probably smelly, half-dressed thirty-something talking about --- *metanoia*.

*Metanoia*: you've heard the word before.

But what does it mean, what is John pointing to when that word: *Metanoia*, is at the heart of all he is preaching?

*Metanoia* has come to mean "repentance;" which has come to mean, far too often, a sorrowful, breast-beating *mea culpa* for our failures.

But that is not the sum and substance of *metanoia*.

*Metanoia* means being turned inside out and in the process of that discombobulation, coming face to face with the living God, who, in that encounter, assures you that your life is not about "tit for tat" bargaining; that what you think are your failures in your life are really necessary and priceless stepping stones to wisdom, and that, as Blessed Julian of Norwich learned in her own *metanoia*:

"All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

Trust *that* and the window to the Really Real begins to open...

And while *metanoia* begins with each of us from the inside out, it also works on each of us, and the larger community, from the outside in.

And so Luke today, aside from confronting us with John, also begins by ticking off the names of the rich and famous, the powerful and strong, as he brings us along the way to our own *metanoia*.

By introducing John and the soon to appear Jesus in the same breath as Caesar and Pilate and the high priests, Luke invites us to see that "God's mercy comes in the form of human weakness – two vulnerable children, baby Jesus and his cousin John, will grow up to change the world; and an instrument of Roman torture, the cross, will be the means by which God transforms the world so that people can at last have the eyes to see and the ears to hear the Really Real.

It seems there is always something of the mustard-seed about the gospel – it creeps in, unnoticed, small and insignificant, until it grows and spreads, infesting whole fields and inviting all kinds of creatures to find safe harbor in its branches.

So Luke begins his story by making the outrageous claim that God is at work in the weak and small – babies and old barren women and unwed teenage mothers and wild-eyed prophets and itinerant preachers and executed criminals – to change the world." David Lose (paraphrase).

And God continues that work today, in you, and you and perhaps even in me.

And as that work continues, what sometimes quickly, but more often slowly begins to happen is that we find ourselves, as Paul

describes it, moving away from the mindset of the crowd, moving away from the mindset of the prevailing culture, and toward putting on the mind of Christ – a mind that sees in all things the living presence of God, and in that seeing, comes to understand that no matter the hills or valleys of life, no matter the crooked pathways or raging streams: that we are all in God; and God is all in all.

That the breath you are breathing at this very moment is the very breath of God.

This is a glimmer, a brief intuition, of what is Really Real.

We needn't go far to discover it, for we already live in the midst of it.

But before we can see it, before we can hear it, we must needs be transformed.

It's not a hard thing to do, since we don't do it.

God does it for us.

But transformation does require our cooperation: in letting go of what we think we know; of cashing in a "tit for tat," bargain-based world view; of learning to live a life that trusts that no matter the circumstances, the faithful God is in the midst of every circumstance, and all shall be well.

Meister Eckhart gave this to his friends as his farewell rule to them at the end of his long journey on the pathway of God.

They to wanted to know what technique to adopt or what book to read or what new teacher to seek out in order to experience the transformation Jesus invites us into.

The answer is that none of these things are needed.

Instead, counsels Eckhart:

"It often happens that what seems trivial to us is important to God.

Therefore, we ought to take everything God puts on us evenly, not comparing and wondering which is more important, or higher, or best.

We ought simply to follow where God leads, that is, to do what we are most inclined to do, to go where we are repeatedly admonished to go -- to where we feel most drawn.

If we do that, God gives us his greatest, in our least, and never fails."

Meister Eckhart.

So then, "our job is not to be Mother Theresa, our job is not to be St. Francis - it's to do what is ours to do.

That, by the way, was Francis' word as he lay dying.

He said, "I have done what was mine to do, now you must do what is yours to do."

R. Rohr, Everything Belongs, 97.

Do what is yours to do, my friends, and you too shall enter into the *metanoia* of God.

+amen.

