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Is Your Faith a Photograph or Video? **John 8: 36-40; John 7: 45-52**

Some years ago, when my children were small, we were attending a large family gathering when near the afternoon's end someone suggested that we stage the dreaded group photograph. After a considerable amount of communal grumbling and groaning, (some of it mine) we tried to comply only to find, unbelievable as this might sound to you, that some of the younger participants, including my own, were less than cooperative, jumping around, making faces, generally making life difficult. Order could only be established by parents barking particularly harsh threats at their little darlings and physically grabbing kids, holding them in place. Finally we all said, "Cheese!" The picture was taken, the ordeal was over: one big happy family. Then I noticed that off to the side an in-law had been filming the entire proceedings with a video camera. I thought, "Ah, on the one hand, we have a photograph, a frozen moment in time conveying how we'd like to see ourselves. On the other we have a video that has captured the family in a far more vibrant way, chronicling a far more complex, far more dynamic, far more true, record of who we really are." The tragedy of life is that many people try to turn their faith into a photograph.

One night this summer, suffering from insomnia, I rose from bed and retired to my study, and picked up one of my sons' school-assigned summer-reading projects, a book entitled, *The Bookseller of Kabul*, an insider's account of the Taliban's behavior in Afghanistan after they gained power. Upon gaining control, the Taliban gave every role of authority in the country, from the central bank to every teaching post, to illiterate clerics. All professionals fled or were jailed. Illiterate mullahs controlled everything, doing all they could to resist modernization, to retard any hint of economic development, scientific inquiry or artistic endeavor. They focused their attention on creating manifestos that decreed how women should cover themselves and refrain from the company of men, and how men should observe the hours of prayer. What was their purpose? Simply this: by implementing a series of superficial, pathetic cultural mores they hoped to recreate the seventh-century society in which the prophet Muhammad lived. They had a photograph in their head of what orthodox Islam was supposed to look like, and they were determined to turn back the clock fourteen centuries to make it happen.

Such idiocy, I should add, happens everywhere.

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, where I was trained as a minister, where all of your pastors have been trained, is now led by a president whose stated purpose is to turn the seminary back to its original purpose, by having students, faculty and trustees adhere to the 19th-century Abstract of Principles written by the seminary's founders.

He has an image of what an orthodox seminary is supposed to look like, and he is trying to make a 21st-century institution conform to his photograph from the 19th.

The original founders of the seminary would be appalled. They were progressive people. Within thirty-five years of her founding, the seminary's president had the audacity to say to the Baptist population, "You don't understand your origins: Baptists don't go back to John the Baptist." He was fired as a result, but he made the point that not even the understanding of our history is a static matter, but a dynamic evolution.

We have in our congregation, Dr. Raleigh Godsey, whose father, Dr. Kirby Godsey, wrote a book when he was president of Mercer University called, *When We Talk About God, Let's Be Honest*. The book clearly revealed Dr. Godsey's faith to be an evolving video that frankly contradicted the unchanging photographic image of our faith that is held by some. Not long after the book was published, some Baptists clamored to have it removed from that bastion of liberalism, the Baptist Book Store. For a time the Baptist Book Store actually sold Dr. Godsey's book under the counter.

(I don't make this stuff up!)

The point is, those clamoring Baptists were saying, "Our faith is set, fixed – immutable. We don't want the stimulus of contrary opinions. Our faith is a fixed and immutable photograph, and we don't want it challenged by a more dynamic view of faith and reality."

Faith is meant to be a video, ever-incorporating new experiences, new insights, new discoveries. Yet to live that kind of faith, as Dr. Godsey's experience suggests, means that you are in for a more conflicted life.

I think about the blind man whose story we considered last week, whose troubles really began *after* he was healed. The religious authorities had a very clear idea of what a holy man looked like, and it didn't include the notion of someone who healed on the Sabbath.

Yet the blind man had had his life changed by a holy man who healed on the Sabbath.

His experience of the divine was richer, broader, than that of the religious authorities around him. That was an uncomfortable position.

The more your faith is rooted and shaped by your experience of life, the more real it is to you, and the more difficult it is for someone else to understand fully.

People whose faith is vibrant and immutable are perceived as a threat by those whose faith is fixed and immutable.

Those parents and grandparents who have had to tear down the walls of their own homophobia in order to love and accept a child or grandchild, their faith knows an agony of spirit that those around them who have not had to face that experience cannot understand or appreciate.

People who have had to challenge and abandon their own cherished misconceptions have a vibrancy to their faith that those whose faith is locked in prejudice and ignorance cannot understand.

The more real your faith is for you, the more your faith will bring you into conflict.

It makes life harder, not easier – and yet such a faith leads to a true existence, a truer understanding of God.

Those people whose faith is habituated, derivative, a vestige of their childhood belief, don't want to encounter someone whose faith is evolving as they incorporate new experiences and ceaselessly try to find God's new way.

When I went off to college I thought I had an air-tight faith that could answer most any question.

Then I began to encounter perspectives that were so foreign to mine that not only could I not answer their questions, I couldn't even *understand* their questions.

I went off to college thinking that my Bible was as much a history book and a science book as it was a book of salvation.

I found myself fearing every scientific discovery, worrying about how every archeological find might undermine my faith.

I finally realized that I could hold on to my childhood faith, but it would function only as a curiosity, something that had no functional utility for my life, no real relevance.

Truths I thought were fixed had to be thrown away.

Guideposts I thought were important had to be let go.

If I was going to have a faith that was truly meaningful, I would have to rebuild my faith.

I started doing so in college and I am still rebuilding to this day, because that is what a faith is meant to be, a ceaseless evolution in conversation with life and the Spirit of God.

Jesus, in his conversation with religious authorities, was trying to alert them to how much courage, how much openness one has to have to be truly faithful to a tradition. He is saying to them, "You are not really children of Abraham," and they say, "What do you mean? We have the biological lineage, we have the temple, we have the Law, we have the dietary restrictions." To which Jesus replies, "That's all external stuff. To have the same spirit as Abraham, you have to be like Huck Finn, willing to light out for the territories, willing to leave everything that you know and move forward in courage toward something new. That's a true child of Abraham." We cannot throw rocks at them for not responding to such a challenge, for we often commit the same sin ourselves.

Yet there is one leader in the Gospel of John who catches the genius of Jesus' meaning -- Nicodemus. He has come to Jesus by night in fear and been absolutely mystified by our Lord's summons that he must be born again, born out of himself, born into orientation around the Kingdom of God. He had been stupefied by our Lord's insistence that he cast himself in absolute dependence upon the living God, in the same way a newborn displays absolute trust upon his or her mother. This notion of being born again stretches his mind, roils his soul. But now we find him having grown a bit, saying to his friends, to his friends! "Wait a minute, let us listen to what this man has to say." They turn on him and say, "Read your Bible. You will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee." Case closed. Regardless of what Jesus does, regardless of what he says, heedless of his miracles, He does not fit their photograph of a Messiah.

Take a picture of the Christian church before Martin Luther: you find grace sold like a grocery sells bread. Take a picture of Christianity before William Tyndale: you will find a church that persecuted people who sought to read the Bible in their own language. Take a picture of the Christian church in the 1800's: you will find Southern preachers proclaiming that it is God's will that some people should own other people. Take a picture of the Christian church in the 1950's: you will find those Southern preachers' descendants preaching that segregation of the races is divinely-ordained. Take a picture of the Christian church in the 1960's: you will find preachers who would not officiate at weddings for divorced people. Take a picture of the Christian church in the 1970's: you will find virtually no women ministers on any church podium. Some of these things are still true in some Christian churches, but not in most. Why? Because Christ has moved the church on. The Spirit of God has blown forward and enough Christians Have opened themselves to the Spirit's wind and allowed themselves be moved forward, too.

Movement. Transition. Openness. Growth.

These are the key components of a vibrant faith.

When we were driving back from the beach on vacation, we happened upon a black Gospel station on which the choir was singing, "Give Me That Old Time Religion." My kids said, "What a neat song."

It is a neat song, but its message is beguiling.

Nobody sings, "Give me that old-timey dentistry. Pull my teeth like you did my great-grandfather's."

Nobody sings, "Give me that old-timey medicine. Treat my cancer like you did my grandmother's."

Why? Because any discipline that is true and meaningful is also an enterprise in flux.

The Spirit of God is moving forward. Such is the way God works in the world.

If you have never changed any aspects of your faith, then your faith is a photograph.
But if you intend to be part of the Kingdom of God then you had better be moving,
for the Kingdom of God can only be caught in a video,
and you will need to be moving, too, if you intend to stay in the picture.

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