

Faithful Waiting

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The First Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2017

“God is faithful. . . .” – 1 Corinthians 1:9

The one thing that Christianity is not is obvious, because if Christianity were obvious, everyone would be Christian.

Food is obvious – that’s why we all eat. Clothing and shelter are obvious – that’s why we all seek to keep them secure. Health is obvious – that’s why we all try to avoid pain and sickness and decline for as long and in as many ways as we can.

Those things are obvious, but Christianity is not. It is not obvious that the way of Jesus is the best way or the only authentic way to live. It is not obvious that God exists or that heaven is the reward that awaits the faithful. Life after death is not obvious.

And thus faith. Faith is the human response to that which is not obvious. Let me say that again. Faith is the human response to that which is not obvious. You don’t need faith to know you need food, but you do need faith to know that you need God. To sense a physical lack requires no faith, but to sense a spiritual lack – that something is missing after the physical needs have been met – that requires faith.

And some people have that sense and some people don’t and there’s really not much any of us can do to change that state of affairs. If you’ve ever loved someone who didn’t love you in return, you know that it’s impossible to persuade someone to love you; they either do or they don’t. They may like you – perhaps a great deal – they may admire and respect you and even emulate you; but if they don’t have that spark of love within themselves that translates into a desire for lifelong companionship, you can’t light that fire for them.

Religion works the same way, because religion is a kind of love. It’s the desire for lifelong companionship with the divine and, in most cases, the companionship of other believers. Religion is a bit like the light bulb of the old psychiatric joke: for it to work, you have to want it to work. Religion doesn’t work for people who don’t love it, just as God doesn’t work for people who don’t love God. That’s what Paul meant, I think, when he wrote to the Christians at Rome that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (8:28).

Of course, in some ways, God works for everyone and everything. Creation is here, we believe, because God brought it here, and that’s God working for good. The fact that we exist is the first and most important sign that God loves us and loves everything else that exists, including the things that cause us to age, sicken, and die. It’s hard for us to wrap our hearts and our heads around that one, because we have an idea of how we think the world should work, and that idea doesn’t include suffering and death or being separated from those we know and love. The ancient Israelites had a tough time with that one as well, which is why the prophet

Isaiah, speaking on God's behalf, had to remind them, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (55:8).

And one of those ways of God that tends not to be one of our ways is waiting. God waits, faithfully and patiently and lovingly, but God waits.

We don't. We act. We mess with stuff. We get things done. We make decisions. We vote. We throw the bums out and throw some new bums in. We put on uniforms and shoulder weapons and march around blowing our trumpets and thumping our drums. We build arsenals and threaten each other with mutually assured destruction – MAD – which confirms that we are indeed mad. But we act. We do unto others before they have a chance to do unto us. We're teetering on that brink right now with North Korea.

We act, and we want God to act as we do. Just like those ancient Israelites we heard about in the first reading from Isaiah, who whined, "O, that you would rend the heavens and come down!" We want God to blow stuff up, to act dramatically, decisively, permanently, and always on our behalf. That's what we want God to do.

While we create wars and rumors of war, we want God to create peace. We want God to create justice while we plot and scheme and write laws behind closed doors to create justice for a few and whatever for everyone else. We want God to do for us what we refuse to do for ourselves.

And what does God do for us? God waits. God waits for us to return to our senses and beat our swords back into ploughshares. God waits for us to awaken from the drugged sleep of greed and gluttony and mindless consumption and to come out of our gilded cages and live with everyone else in an economy of enough. God waits for us to grow out of the tantrums of our inner two-year-old.

God waits, and in that waiting is God's faithfulness. "God is faithful," Paul wrote to the Corinthians in today's text. "By him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

The story of Jesus, which is the story we prepare to tell again in this new church year, is the story of God's faithfulness toward us and all creation. That faithfulness began at creation and continues through all the new creations by which God seeks, in holy love, as our Statement of Faith puts it, "to save all people from aimlessness and sin."

A call to Abraham and Sarah, and behold – a new creation, a chosen people.

Liberation from Egyptian slavery, and look – a new creation, servants of the living God.

A constitution and bill of rights on a mountain in the desert of Sinai, and see here – a new creation, a nation of priests.

Prophets to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and note well – a new creation, justice as the fabric of society itself.

A new constitution and bill of rights from a carpenter-turned-rabbi-and-healer from Nazareth who preached a famous sermon on another mountain, and here it is – a new creation of those who see the cross as the path to the crown.

An empty tomb on Easter and a promise to return, and at last – a new creation, made fresh and new and eternally alive in resurrection.

Those new creations – which are really nothing more than recapitulations of that first creation – they show us how God waits. We give up on God, again and again, but God never

gives up on us. God accepts us, and we refuse to accept our acceptance. In loving faithfulness, God calls to us from the future, and waits for us to return to those moorings that will see us through this life and any life to come.

And if we wish to serve the God in whose image and likeness we have been created – the God who waits – then maybe waiting faithfully for the world that includes us to return to its senses and to the God who waits is perhaps the very best thing we can do.