



June 2012
Volume 85 Number 6

Dear Friends,

God on Probation A few weeks ago I met with the 8th grade class as part of their final preparation for coming before Bishop Beckwith at St. Paul's Church in Paterson for Confirmation near the end of April. Among the things we reviewed were the promises of the Baptismal Covenant—the core curriculum of Confirmation at St. Elizabeth's—which begin with the affirmations of The Apostles' Creed: "Do you believe in God the Father?...Do you believe in Jesus Christ...Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?"

On their face, they are fairly straightforward questions. But when we explored what we might mean by "believe," the conversation became more complicated, and more interesting.

I looked down the table at Dillon Carroll and asked his classmates what I might mean if I said that I believed in Dillon. We quickly established that the issue was not whether I thought Dillon existed, but what I thought of his character. To say that I believed in Dillon meant that I trusted him, that if I needed help, he would be someone I would turn to with confidence. To believe in Dillon meant that if there were something important which I needed to have done, I would turn it over to him with confidence that he would do his best. I would trust him not to take advantage of my faith in him, and I could depend on him to deal with me, and anything or anyone I entrusted to him, fairly.

And so we went back to our original subject, What does it mean to say that we "believe" in God? Or that we have "faith" in God?

When we make those assertions, in the Creeds or elsewhere, we are saying something significantly more interesting, more powerful, and more demanding, than "On a good day, by and large, I am prepared to acknowledge that there might be some larger force out there to whom I might turn, probably in private, in extreme distress when everything else I have tried first has not quite panned out."

To believe in God is to trust God. Which is different from entering into a probationary relationship with God in which, as long as God gives us what we desire, then we are prepared to renew the

relationship. Whatever commitment issues we might have in our human relationships, when we get to God, it seems to me that most people are definitely not ready to stop playing the field.

The de facto theology I often encounter—and I recognize its appeal—is that we will believe in God until we hit something very painful, very puzzling, or very contradictory to what we have been taught or would like to believe. “I used to believe in God,” I sometimes hear, “but then [fill in the blank] happened, and now I just can’t anymore.” God did not give us what we wanted, or had been led to expect, so we bailed on the relationship. Maybe it was a personal experience; maybe it was something larger—a war, a natural disaster, an act of horrifying cruelty—and that becomes the reason why we do not, or cannot, believe in God.

Heresy—what’s the problem? A major source of this relationship collapse is heresy. For a moment, try not to think about heroic independent thinkers being cruelly tortured by corrupt and dim-witted clergy, but think of heresy as incompetent medical advice—something dangerously untrue, about a critically important subject, which has been established by both theory and experience. A doctor who denounces scrubbing before surgery as the outmoded and restrictive practice of Victorian obsession with cleanliness, and instead suggests that we should embrace the goodness of all creation and our own inherent healthiness and go into the operating room relying on the full power of our inner purity would not be celebrated as an exciting new voice in American medicine, but would be banned from practice. The value of washing before surgery is not a matter of opinion—it is required practice based on established doctrine and dogma, and confirmed by observation and experience. A doctor who is heretical on the subject is not an heroic free spirit, but a danger to the entire community. Scrubbing may be tedious, intellectually uninteresting, lacking in any prospect of personal creativity, and hard on your skin. We do not do it because we like it; we do it because we like the result it produces.

Wishful thinking about God, because it starts with us and not with God, is more likely to produce interesting heresy than good theology. We would like God to be simple, so we say that it really all comes down to love. For that to be true, we will need to do some serious work on what we mean by “love.” We want to comfort people, or give them hope on their own terms, so we promise them, one way or another, that God will provide/take care of/protect them or those they love. To reconcile that statement with actual experience, we need to do major work on what we mean by “provide/take care of/protect.” And if we so dilute those words so that whatever happens falls under our new definition, have we actually said anything significant in the first place?

I think people often break up with God because they have been badly taught—they have been the victims of heresy. Most of the heresy I encounter is well-meaning. People want to present an image of God which is attractive (that is, appeals to us on our own terms), is simple (that is, makes sense to us based on our experience), and is comforting (that is, offers us the promise of what we desire). But God’s identity, character, and nature are not rooted in what we want, but in who God actually is. What we want God to be probably reveals more about our identity than it does about God’s. Heresy is mostly our moderately sophisticated attempt to create the God we want; it is idolatry after it has gone to college or, in some cases, seminary.

And so when our hard experience comes up against our soft image of God, we are disillusioned and we break up and walk away, often, sadly, turning from God in the midst of circumstances when a lively relationship with the real God would be most helpful.

The hardest part of finding that real God is giving up our propensity for defining the God we want, and trusting, believing in, having faith in, the God who is. If our sense of God's identity never makes us uncomfortable, unhappy, puzzled, angry, or worse, then we are probably not dealing with the real God. Am I making this up? Read about the real God in the Bible and watch your reactions.

Episcopalians are Christians who believe that we find God in Scripture—in the Old and New Testaments. We are not, well most of us are not, Fundamentalists because we believe that we need the assistance of both Reason and Tradition to discern God's identity in and through the words of the texts. The dialogue between simplicity, complexity, and ambiguity in Scripture is part of what makes its study so interesting and so rewarding, especially in groups. Reason is not equal with Scripture; it is not a test that we apply to Scripture to rule some portions in and some out. In the seeking after God, Reason is subservient to Scripture; it is a tool we have been given to extract reliable meaning from Scripture. And Tradition is not mindless repetition of pronouncements past, but is bringing into our engagement with Scripture the voices and insights of people just as smart as we are who are unencumbered with all of the assumptions we acquire simply by virtue of living in our particular time and culture. I suspect that every culture's education, certainly including our own, produces a complex network of insights, blind spots, prejudices, and unquestioned errors of both content and methodology. Tradition brings other voices into the conversation so that, between us all, we can see God in Scripture more clearly.

In the Episcopal Church clergy function more effectively as matchmakers than as proxies—we do our best work when we broker a good first date between you and God. Our power is real, but limited—what you want is a relationship with God, not endless conversations about how there aren't any good gods left out there.

So my hope, and my invitation, is that you take a deep breath and resolve to get out there and believe in God. Church is a good place for you—or your children (or your parents)—to come in the hope of finally meeting the One you want. God comes here often, and you and God have a number of mutual friends—laypeople and clergy—who would be very glad to fix you up. This is a real-life adult relationship, not a sitcom/Rom-com caricature, so you can expect it to be complicated, but it will be like nothing else you have ever known.

Pentecost, May 27th, is something like the dazzling first date; the next week, Trinity Sunday, is when God talks about his—or her—background and family, and then the rest of the season after Pentecost—all the way to Advent on December 2, is when you can get to know each other by hearing the stories that got us to this point.

At every service we say one of the Creeds, and the next time you say that you believe in God, I hope you will let the deep, powerful, and exciting complexity of what it might mean truly to “believe” in the real God enter into, and richly bless, your heart, your mind, and your soul.

The Rev. Cn. John G. Hartnett