

“Faith and Fear”

Mark 4.35–41

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 25 June 2006

Orthodoxy has little or nothing to do with faith. That seems like a fairly radical statement, I know. So, let me also express the converse: faith has little or nothing to do with orthodoxy.

I know it’s difficult to do this here in the Rockies, but imagine yourself out on a really big lake...seven miles wide and eleven miles long...about 35 times the size of Grand Lake. It’s pretty intimidating when a storm kicks up.

I remember when I was about 11 years old, I was at sailing camp on Cape Cod, and a counselor and I were out on the Bay in a 12-foot dinghy when a squall came up, swamped the boat, and then we capsized. I was terrified...probably somewhat like those disciples who just couldn’t understand why Jesus was just snoozing away in the back of the boat while the storm raged on the lake. They were scared of drowning; the fear of death is built into our brain stem or the “reptilian brain,” so they really can’t be faulted for worrying about their survival.

There is a theory that we really have three brains: the brain stem (responsible for very basic functions: digestion, circulation, breathing, and fight-or-flight response), the limbic system or amygdala and hippocampus (linked to expression and mediation of emotional response), and the neocortex or our “mammalian brain” (which enables language, logic, processing sensory information, art, science, compassion, empathy, and foresight). And the tricky part for us is that all three parts – the brain stem, limbic system, and neocortex – operate simultaneously. (So, if you’re having a fight-or-flight response right now, you need to count on your mammalian brain to quash your reptilian fears about being threatened by this sermon!)

So, if fear is located physiologically in the brain stem, where do we register faith? Put yourself out on that boat again...in the stormy center of a huge lake...plenty of thunder, lightning, and wind...your reptilian brain kicks right in and then Jesus says, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

I’m certainly no expert in the physiology and function of the brain, but it seems to me that Jesus is asking his disciples to use all three of their brains: to temper their reptilian “gut” reaction with their sense of faith. There is even some research that suggests that the temporal lobes of the neocortex enable us to have spiritual impulses and perceive the divine. Two neuropsychologists write “The primitive approach to survival is ‘fight or flight.’ The potential of the neocortex is that it can find new ways to survive because it is capable of profound learning.”¹

So, perhaps Jesus was saying, “get your temporal lobes in line, lads!” But faith isn’t necessarily spiritual. Faith is, above all, *relational*. I have faith in my dog, Kobi, knowing that when I get home I’ll hear his tail thumping on the hardwood floor, and then he’ll come and greet me with a slobbery kiss. (*Fido*, by the way is Latin for “I trust” or “I have faith.”) Religious faith, then, is about relationship with God. And if those dear doubting disciples had been adequately attached to Jesus by relationship, Jesus wouldn’t have asked, “Why are you still afraid? Have you no faith?”

¹ Renate and Geoffrey Caine, *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*. (Menlo Park: Addison-Wesley, 1994), p. 68.

Do you see the contrast that Jesus sets up in that pair of questions? Do you see how he juxtaposes faith and fear? (You've probably heard me say it before, but it bears repetition: the opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is fear.)



I want to return to the seemingly rash claim that I made at the outset of this sermon: that orthodoxy and faith have little or nothing to do with each other.

In this great story of Jesus stilling the storm, where do you see orthodoxy enter the storyline? Is it the part where Jesus wakes up and castigates the disciples for not believing that he is one component of the triune God, fully human and fully divine, born of a virgin, destined to be crucified, then rise on the third day to judge the quick and the dead? *I missed that part.*

Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote that "It distorts ... [the] gospel [writers] to hear ... [them] as presenting a Christ saying that he hopes that his followers will develop a certain opinion about himself."²

The disciples knew Jesus not as God, but as Jesus of Nazareth, a healer and preacher of the kingdom of God who was endowed with incredible spiritual power, one might even say so great as to quell a storm at sea. And it was *that* Jesus with whom they developed a relationship, *in whom* they eventually had faith.

Cantwell Smith writes that "'To believe' in modern English means to hold an opinion, whether it be right or wrong. (Increasingly, it means to hold an opinion that is at best dubious.) No serious theological thinker has ever held, and the Bible nowhere suggests, that it is important to hold the opinion that God exists, whether that opinion be right or wrong. Belief in the modern meaning of the word, had had no place in the history of Christian thought. *The concept is not in the Bible.*"³

Unfortunately, many times the translation of the Bible from Greek into English confuses and replaces faith and belief, translating *pisteuo* as "to believe," rather than "to have faith in," which may seem awkward or verbose. So, perhaps "to trust" is a better shorthand translation that "to believe." You remember the story of "doubting Thomas" from John's gospel, which concludes with the usual translation: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." From that translation, you might think the message is "Don't trust your senses, and don't worry about intellectual integrity." And that totally misses the point! Try this more direct translation and see if you pick up a different message: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet trust."

Orthodoxy – *you knew I'd get back to the topic* – literally means "right opinion." That in a nutshell is why I think it has nothing to do with faith...with relationships of trust. I don't care so much about members of this congregation holding a correct opinion about Jesus and being in relationship with God through Christ.

Sharon and I are both reading a book by an emerging-church, Evangelical pastor named Brian McLaren called *A Generous Orthodoxy*. Okay, it's confession time: I was resistant to reading this book (a) because it was by a popular Evangelical and (b) because it contained the term "orthodoxy," and I'm not particularly interested in orthodoxy, generous or otherwise. I'm still reading it, and even enjoying parts of it!

Here is how McLaren describes his topic: "For most people, *orthodoxy* means right thinking or right opinions, or in other words, 'what we think,' as opposed to 'what they think.' In contrast, orthodoxy in this book may mean something more like 'what God knows, some of which we believe a little, some of which they believe a little, and about

² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Belief and History*. (Charlottesville, UVA Press, 1977), p. 77.

³ *ibid.*, p. 78.

which we all have a whole lot to learn.”⁴ I love that he describes orthodoxy not as having all the answers, yet he still dwells in the area of intellectual assent, rather than relationship.

I’m certainly not suggesting that you shouldn’t bring your brain to church on Sunday, but go ahead and bring all three of them! (You need the dorsal and lateral areas of your frontal lobe to do the cognitive work, and you need the medial and ventral areas to develop relationship!)

And yet, too often, we let our reptilian brain and the fear it perceives dominate our outlook on the world. We may not be fearful about being lost at sea, but how about having enough money to retire or send your kids to college? What about the fear of dying? What are the fears that are “renting too much space” in your mind? By bringing them up from the basement of our reptilian brain to the higher functions of the neocortex, we can moderate fear with faith. Our relationship with God puts everything else in context. And we develop intimate relationship with God through prayer, worship, study, service, and in myriad other ways.

To close, let me leave you with these ancient and wise words of faith and relationship from Psalm 139:

1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

3 You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

5 You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7 Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11 If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”

12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p.28.

15 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.
Amen.