

A Sermon about Believing and Having Faith for Pentecost 2001

I expect you know what a placebo is. It's sometimes called sugar pills and means that whoever prescribes it is either trying to fool you or trying to prescribe something that will make you feel better. A friend recently sent me an article about placebos. The article she was referring me to described the brain's reaction to placebos. Some one hooked up the brain of some cats or mice and fed them something that they liked and even though if it can't be digested or metabolized by the little mammals, the brain centers light up as though they had been fed something the animals really could metabolize and learn to like or even learn to crave. The scientist thought this was evidence that pleasant sensations produce a sense of well being in animals. Of course my friend who is a minister wanted to believe that this was evidence that the brain is hard wired to respond to pleasant sensations that we call love or spiritual values; or even the sense of comfort that patients get when they visit a doctor and get reassurance that they are well or at least more well than dying. I told my friend that I needed no scientific experiment to demonstrate the value of being a comforting doctor to a patient who needs comforting. That's the way I made my living for 50 years. I was a psychiatrist. If my patients respected me and I respected them and we lived together long enough we called it good psychotherapy and everybody felt better as a result of that psychotherapy. We tried to make something scientific out of it; and tried to train young doctors to do successful psychotherapy and make good psychiatrists of them. But they had to believe that something they were doing or saying was helpful to the patients. So in a way we were making a science out of a technique that doctors had been using for hundred of years when they had no medicines or procedures that were scientifically or chemically efficacious. Medical students were very suspicious of anything that doctors did that did not have a scientific basis. But Sigmund Freud really believed that psychotherapy did have a scientific basis and proposed a system for exploring the unconscious of a person to find the neurotic conflict buried in their souls that was making them sick. I have to admit that I spent many years lying on a Freudian couch trying to find the reason that some people did not like me. After all my mother had liked me; why shouldn't everyone like me? I never solved the problem.

I was never able to make a real science out of psychotherapy. That's the reason I was able to find comfort in the presence of ministers who know about the comforting presence of pastoral care. They believe in the therapeutic value of prayer, the healing value of faith, and the happiness that comes with the love of God. They did not try to make a science out of pastoral care. I became more comfortable after I became a minister who cares instead of a scientific doctor without a science.

I still get asked sometimes if I really believe in prayer or God's response to prayer or any of the holy words we use in church like faith or faith healing or as we speak today or The Holy Spirit. I think the question "Do you believe . . ." in church words is trying to make a science out of faith and spirit. But when we talk on Holy Days like Pentecost and Ascension Day, Easter and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have to use words that do not respond well to questions, and we end up using words that belong to science.

Now I believe that Jesus has continued to live with us since he was crucified on that first Good Friday so many years ago. But I can't make a science out of that. I don't know how to answer my son when he says he just can't believe all that stuff we talk about in church. I tell him I don't know how to talk about believing all this stuff, but I do believe that my faith in him and his faith in me is helpful and reassuring when we need reassurance from each other. And in that way the things that we talk about in church are reassuring to me. I am reassured when I find that others have faith in relationships whether it is a relationship with another person or a spirit like God or Jesus. The feast of Pentecost is a way of saying the Holy Spirit is with us and among us.

Many years ago I was getting some flute lessons from an old man who had undergone some surgery for a prostate cancer. He subsequently died of that cancer so I suspect he knew he was dying of cancer when he told me we could continue doing flute lessons. He said, "I like

doing our flute lessons because I always feel better when we spend some time together.” And I said and I feel good when I’m with you. That’s the way I make my living. Were we being fraudulent with each other because we were ostensibly doing flute lessons?

We were incidentally making each other feel better? We strengthened each other. We had faith without ever trying to rationalize or explain what it was we had faith in.

When all those disciples got together in that upper room one day, and were visited by the Holy Spirit, they celebrated. They knew something was transforming them. I’m sure they did not understand that force like a mighty wind, that spirit, the love of God they knew that day; but they had faith that what they were experiencing was good like the experience they had when they lived with Jesus for three years. They were lucky that they lived before the age of reason and scientific research. They did not have to hook up electrodes to their brains to know that it was a good time . . . a good experience for them. They tried to communicate in God talk what they had experienced with God; and they succeeded in transmitting their faith because of the faith they had that what they experienced was good. So what, if they called it God or a celebration or fire descending from heaven or even group therapy or group delusion when they talked about Pentecost. They had to call it something; and when the story is transmitted down to us, we have to call it something too.

But don’t ask me if I really believe all these stories. I can’t answer that question. Ask me if I have faith in the Holy Spirit and then I can answer you. “Yes. I have faith that what they experienced was good and what I experience with you tonight . . . in this church is good and good for us.

Happy Pentecost. Amen.