

It matters where our faith leads us, what emerges from what we believe. A number of years ago I read of a couple in California who refused medical treatment for their diabetic son because they believed he had been cured in a faith healing service, and that they needed to claim the miracle. The child died, and the couple was charged with negligent homicide.

In the news lately has been the conviction of a man who shot and killed a doctor while the two of them were at Church because the doctor performed abortions. He didn't deny it. He believed – and I assume still does – that he did the right thing.

A faithful and loving partner of more than 30 years may be denied access to the loved one in the hospital and have no say in treatment or even in funeral arrangements because people of religious conviction believe their relationship to be sinful and have passed laws and constitutional amendment to enforce that belief.

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There was an article in last Sunday's New York Times magazine section about the influence of seven Christians on the Texas Board of Education in shaping text books used by most of the public schools in 46 or 47 states in this country. They are conservative Christians who believe that children should be taught from a particular perspective. They are quite open about the fact that they vote as a bloc to advance a Christian agenda, an agenda of a particular land of Christianity.

One of the people interviewed said he believes that the universe was created in 6 days and is less than 10,000 years old. It was, he says, created by God to look as if it were several billion years old. The evidence is there; it was just created.

The Church that banned the writings of Copernicus and jailed Galileo for suggesting that the earth rotates around the sun rather than the other way around was not filled with only stupid or ignorant people. The best scientists of the day in the 17th century were priests. They were the ones most likely to be educated. They knew the evidence. They just maintained that God was capable of creating the universe with the earth at its center and making it appear otherwise. God could create whatever evidence God chose.

The so-called Spanish Inquisition began in 1478 for the purpose of insuring orthodoxy in religion. It was officially abolished in 1833.

It really does matter where our faith leads us.

There is a long and noble tradition of religious tolerance in the United States. Whatever faith works for you is to be honored and respected. It is between you and God. I believe in that tolerance. I believe it is an important piece of what has added to the vitality of both this country and religion.

I don't believe that there is only one way to encounter and embrace the love of God. I don't really believe that I – or anyone else – has possession of the absolute truth. I believe that we see through a glass darkly and do the best that we can. I don't believe that my answers are the only answers, or even necessarily the right answers. I am on my own journey, I have not arrived yet. Or as a piece of graffiti once put it: "Be patient with God, God's not finished yet."

But there needs to be a Christian voice raised that says when faith leads to violence – the violence of injustice or oppression or the denial of human dignity – then it is something other than faith. There is nothing loving about the imposition of one will over another.

That needs to be said by voices other than secular voices that seek to tear down all faith. It needs to be said by people who believe in a loving God who has redeemed the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is an arrogant faith that imposes itself on others. That is as true of my faith as anyone's. The irony is that in the New Testament the opposite of faith isn't doubt. Doubt is a part of faith. Wonder is a part of any living relationship of love. The opposite of faith in the New Testament is pride – hubris. The opposite of faith is the conviction that I can make it on my own. The opposite of faith is certainty.

Jesus did battle with the Pharisees. Their problem wasn't lack of faith; they were the most faithful of all people. Their problem was arrogance. Care needs to be taken lest we wind up on the wrong side of that argument.

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus' temptation after his baptism and before beginning his public ministry. It might be seen as something of a spiritual retreat, maybe a time of struggling with his vocation. Maybe the real temptation was the acceptance of a ministry of suffering, sacrifice and love. The temptation was to be something else.

"If you are the Son of God, turn this stone into a loaf of bread." That shouldn't be too hard. Luke tells us that Jesus was hungry – he was famished. It is about using power – the power of God – to meet personal needs. And maybe it's about more than that. Think what you could do by turning stones into bread. You could feed all the hungry people in the world. And it wouldn't cost a thing. It wouldn't require anything from you or me. We could be as selfish as we wish.

But it doesn't really work that way. Real humanity needs more than bread. It is fed by love. Bread without caring doesn't feed much.

If you worship me the authority of kings will be given to you. You will have the power to make the world be the way you want it. The problem is, of course, you become what you worship. If you want to be powerful enough to make people do things – maybe even believe things – you have to give yourself over to power.

There's a different kind of power. It is the power that comes from serving God. The world doesn't think much of it, but it can fill your life with meaning and purpose. It is the power of the Cross. It is the power of God. Worship that. Give yourself to it.

If you are the Son of God prove it. Prove it to me, and maybe most of all, prove it to yourself. Prove that what you believe is really true. Jump from the pinnacle of the temple. The Bible says God will save you.

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Don't put anyone you love to the test. Love isn't tested; it is trusted. It is always tempting to test it. But testing tears love down, trusting builds it up.

Every temptation is the seduction of power. Every response of Jesus is toward love. Every temptation is the promise of certainty. Every response is a response of love and the trust it demands.

Lent is a season of humility. It is a posture of repentance. There is a tradition in the Episcopal Church of giving things up for Lent and taking other things on. I want to do something different this year. I want to give up the arrogance of certainty. I want to take on trusting the goodness of God.

That is my Lenten discipline.

Amen.

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