

“Faith 101”
Romans 1:1-7, 13-17

If you have ever been to college, basic courses are often identified numerically as 101's. When it comes to religion, a basic 101 question "what is faith?" is a question difficult to answer, because faith involves many different levels. It is kind of like Brene Brown's recent book *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connections and the Language of Human Experience*. In the book, Brown tries to provide a roadmap and dictionary to 87 nuances of human emotions, emotions that effect thought and behavior.

For many years I have benefited from a more basic roadmap to emotions, provided by psychiatrist David Viscott. He says that when we are anxious, we are afraid of losing something. When we lose it, we hurt. When we hurt, we often unleash anger on others or the circumstances around us. If we don't unleash anger on others and circumstances, we often unleash it on ourselves in guilt, guilt, that if unalleviated, leads to depression. But if we learn to trust self, others, the world, and even God, we avoid much anxiety and fear, avoiding many of the hurtful loses that lead to anger, guilt, and depression. Through trust, we find happiness or joy.

The English word "faith," as revealed by its Latin root, means "to trust, even to care, desire, and love." That is why Jesus scholar Marcus Borg once called faith "beloving," more than believing." Faith begins with receptivity. It often develops into mental assent, assent that we typically call belief. But the deepest forms of faith involve things like absolute trust, loyalty, indestructible hope in something both within and without, a love that transforms life, actions, and even the world.

I think of the Roman Catholic priest, who after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's was asked to go around to churches to explain the changes. He appeared on one stage before a gathering of priests, clothed only in a pair of little white-washed trousers and a T-shirt. This is what he said. "I am 54 years old. I have spent most of my adult life with my back turned to the congregation as I ministered at the altar. Now my church says, 'Turn around and face the people.' I have spent most of my life hiding among incense pots and candles, doing my work as a clergyman, and now the church says, 'Come out and be with the people.' I have spent most of my adult life saying the mass in Latin, and now my church says, 'Speak English, so the people will understand.'" He went on and on describing the changes, before concluding, "As you can see, I have been stripped

of almost everything. All that I have left is God.” Some there melted into tears.

We all long for such a stripped bare faith, faith in God, faith in self, faith in others, faith in life, faith in the world. Those who claim to follow Jesus typically direct their longings for faith to a collection of scriptures called the Bible, and to such basic books in that collection, like the NT book of Romans. If we patiently study books like Romans, we can learn the truth of Latin church father Tertullian, who said, "Faith is patience with the lamp lit."

Romans was written by one of the first great missionaries of the church, the man we know as the apostle Paul. Some of us have mixed feelings about Paul, thinking of him as arrogant, a woman hater, a man ridden by guilt and sin. But these feelings are probably skewed, especially if we read books like Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan's *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*.

In their book, we learn that there are actually 3 Paul's in the NT, the first Paul, who was a radical follower of Jesus till about 50 CE; a second conservative Paul of about 60 CE, who was probably a later disciple of the missionary; and a third reactionary Paul, another later disciple of about 110 CE, who reacted to the conservatism of the second Paul. The first Paul wrote the authentic letters of Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon. The second conservative Paul, as a disciple, wrote I and II Timothy; along with Titus, while the third reactionary Paul, as still another disciple, wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and II Thessalonians.

We tangle all these up and miss the core of the radical first Paul, who was not anti-Semitic, anti-sex, and anti-woman, but rather a man who stressed social and political equality for the church and the world. His teaching that "Jesus Christ is Lord" was a radical political statement, and his understanding of the cross and resurrection was very different than the commonly assumed substitutionary atonement ideas of later times. The first Paul used the phrase "in Christ" over 100 times, espousing a vision of real community and a vision of salvation that had to do with much more than an afterlife.

It can be helpful to sketch the life of this first Paul, as we consider his take on the heart of faith. Paul was born in 10 to 15 CE, to parents who resided in the Greek university city of Tarsus, a city exposed to Greek culture, language,

business, and life. Paul was raised in a Jewish family, and trained at a rabbinical school located in Jerusalem.

He became a Pharisee, a rabbi, and a maker of goat hair, cloth tents. As a rabbi, he was probably married at one time. Paul accepted the OT as divine revelation, seeing the Jewish law as God's supreme gift to the Jews, a gift that meant the Jewish people were privileged and destined.

Paul early on hated and persecuted the first Christian believers with fanatical zeal, till in 35 CE, on his way to imprison some Christians, he had an experience of Jesus on a Damascus road. For the next 10 years he spent time in the Arabia desert, trying to sort out his newfound faith, before returning to Damascus to preach about his new Lord, preaching that incurred persecution by mostly Jews. He then visited Jerusalem to touch base with the first Christians there. In about 46 to 47 CE, the church at Antioch called him to be a missionary to Asia Minor.

Over his life, Paul made at least 3 great missionary journeys to cities all over the Roman world, spending months to several years in most of the cities, preaching and teaching and starting congregations. He was imprisoned in Philippi, chased out of Thessalonica, smuggled out of Berea, laughed at in Athens and Corinth. Wherever Paul went, there was either a church or a riot. Some of the big issues Paul dealt with were whether Christianity was going to be another Jewish sect or something open to all peoples, and whether all Jewish laws and rites like circumcision were necessary for genuine faith.

Paul came down on the side of opening faith to both Jews and non-Jews, working with freedom in Roman towns and cities far from the mother church in Jerusalem, even breaking with fellow missionary Barnabas to team up with a more open minded missionaries like Silas. But sensing the danger of two growing wings in the Christian church, one in Jerusalem and one in the rest of the Greco-Roman world, he encouraged members of his missionary congregations to share a big offering with the poorer Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

In 50 CE, holed up in the city of Corinth during the winter months, with seas closed to navigation, he planned a dangerous visit to Jerusalem that could result in death, despite dreaming of preaching in Rome and beyond in Spain. So, he wrote a letter to the believers in Rome, to Christians he had never met, summarizing the core of his beliefs over 20 years of teaching and preaching. The letter was his

swan song, a last will and testament, written to a church in Rome that was overemphasizing its independence from the Jerusalem believers, basking in newfound freedom. The congregation was struggling with practical issues like dietary rules and holy days. So Paul wrote and tried to answer three great questions. First, how can sinful humans be put right with God? (The answer: through faith in the grace of God.) Two, what is the place of the Jews in history? (The answer: they are God's chosen, but all peoples can join them in one community of God.) And three, what are the practical evidences of the Christian life? (The answer: nonconforming love that refuses revenge and overcomes evil with good.)

The resulting book has been called by people like poet Samuel Coleridge, "the most profound book in the world." All down through the ages, the book of Romans has been crucial to the development of faith in Christian hearts. St. Augustine, the father of the Catholic church, read a text from Romans while in a garden, and found the strength to give up a former life of immorality to become a Christian.

Martin Luther, father of the Protestant church, came to believe we are justified by faith, as he read the book of Romans while struggling with terrible guilt.

The first chapter of the book is kind of like a piano concerto, which begins with a crashing chord, and then states the theme it is going to develop. Concertos were first played in private homes, abuzz with conversing guests, till the crashing chord got people's attention, as the pianist presented the theme to be developed in the musical piece.

So with the first chapter of Romans. The crashing chord is Paul identifying himself as a servant and an apostle, with the privilege of proclaiming Jesus, a servant and apostle who is grateful for the Roman believers and wants them to know of his plans. Then Paul states the basic theme of the whole book. "I have complete confidence in the gospel; it is God's power to save all who believe, first the Jews and also the Gentiles. For the gospel reveals how God puts people right with the divine self; it is through faith from beginning to end." The rest of the book of Romans tries to explain how this faith develops in us.

If we read the book of Romans, we discover Paul's faith doesn't always compute in our understandings, calling to mind the paradoxical piece by American

novelist, essayist, poet, environmental activist, cultural critic, and farmer Wendell Berry. Entitled "Something That Won't Compute, Berry challenges our assumed faith.

"So friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Share all that you have and be poor. Love someone who does not deserve it. Denounce the government and embrace the flag. Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands. Give your approval to all you cannot understand. Praise ignorance, for what humans have not encountered they have not destroyed. Ask the questions that have no answers. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, and you will not live to harvest."

"Say that leaves are harvested when they have rotted into mold. Call that profit. Prophecy such return. Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years. Listen to carrion—put your ear close and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come. Expect the end of the world. Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts. So long as women do not go cheap for power, please women more than men. Ask yourself; will this satisfy a woman wanting to bear a child? Will this disturb the sleep of a woman near to giving birth. Swear allegiance to what is highest your thoughts. As soon as generals and politicians can predict the motions of your mind, lose it. Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong way. Practice resurrection."

Many years ago, I came across *Magic Eye* books, which led me and other family members to stumble around the house with eyes glued one or two inches from pages. The books are filled with pages of colorful and supposedly meaningless patterns that don't seem to compute. But if the patterns are looked at in the right way, a 3-D image emerges and comes into focus as the page is stared at within 2 or 3 inches, and then distanced from the eyes, in an amazing form of art. This is a suggestive image of faith. People of faith are those who look carefully at the world and life, and whereas others see only meaningless patterns of one dimension, people of faith see the image of God emerge in multiple dimensions, an image of love, grace, beauty, meaning, hope, clarity, mystery. That is what Paul's basic message in the book of Roman was all about. The heart of faith is to develop a

magic eye for God and love.

Famed Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn spent years in a Soviet labor camp. He tells of the day in one of those awful camps, when he simply gave up. In despair, he put down his shovel, sat on a rock with head in his hands, even though he knew that others had been killed for doing the same thing. But as he sat there, a comrade walked over, and without a word, between Solzhenitsyn's legs, used a shovel to draw a cross in the dirt.

Solzhenitsyn regained faith, courage, hope, and was later released in exile to the US, before returning to his country. In 1970, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, penning these beautiful lines. "I stand under an apple tree in blossom, and I breathe - - this, I believe is the simple, most precious freedom - - the freedom to breathe deeply, as I now can - - as long as there is fresh air to breathe under an apple tree after a shower, we may survive a little longer."

It is the season of Lent, the approximately 40 days before Easter, a time to look beyond, to give up the things that bind us, to find a new spring time in life. And this new spring time can come through the magic eye of faith, a faith that doesn't always compute but allows us to see the image of a cross at our feet, an image of love, grace, beauty, meaning, hope, clarity, and mystery. May we look carefully and see what is often hidden behind pandemics, illnesses, mental struggles, sufferings, divisions, politics, religious conflicts, racist injustices, wars, and growing climate change destruction. May we look deeply, remembering Jesus words in Matthew 6:22, "The eye is the lamp of your person. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light." And as Paul put it, "The one who is righteous, or right with God, right self, others, and the world, that person lives by faith."