

Full of constant love

Psalm 103:1-8

August 26, 2007

It is easier, much easier, to be an unbeliever.

Just look around you. Just look at your world, and what do you see? You see unimaginable wealth and deep poverty. You see people doing OK and people not doing OK. You see people living well into old age and children sick, children maimed, children dying.

You see people succeeding by hard work, but also by being in the right place at the right time or by being born in the right place at the right time to the right people. And you see people going nowhere, people who seem like lightning rods for calamity, because they don't know any better or won't do any better or because other people won't let them do any better or for no reason at all.

Life unfolds around you in a complex tapestry of joy and disappointment, great pleasure and great pain, enchanting beauty and terrible suffering, some of it by human choice and human effort, but most of it, it seems, by accident or by fate or by chance.

It is easier, much easier, to be an unbeliever.

When you are an unbeliever, you don't have to bother with all the difficult questions. If there is a God, then why did God let Katrina happen? Why did God let the bridge fall or the mine collapse? Why did God let me lose my job? Why does God let bad things happen to good people?

If there is a loving God, why does God allow children to get leukemia or starve because of drought or be born with debilitating handicaps? If there is a loving God, then why is the world filled with so much hate? Is God too weak to do anything about it? Or does God just not care?

It is much easier to be an unbeliever, because it requires nothing of you! No questions, no explanations, no agonizing over stuff. Stuff just happens! Bad things happen, good things happen, stuff just happens. You just do your best to do your best and hope you are in the right place at the right time and that lightning doesn't strike you. You accept the world as it is, you go along to get along, and you don't waste any energy fretting about a world as it should be or could be.

To be an unbeliever is easy ... but to believe is hard!

Belief takes courage and patience and endurance. Belief requires hard work and a keen mind, the willingness to look hard and long into the world to discern the hand of God in it, and to keep on looking even when you see nothing. Belief requires boldness and daring, the readiness to hope for a better world and to do something about it. Belief involves risk: caring in the face of rejection, hoping in the face of repeated disappointments, trusting in the face of doubt.

Belief is the narrow way, the hard way, and belief is often a lonely way. But take it! Take it! It's a good way! Choose the hard way, because it's a good way! It is a way that leads ...

*The Lord is merciful and loving,
slow to become angry and full of constant love ...*

It is a way that leads to the Lord!

In a world that is often unforgiving ... *the Lord forgives all my sins.*

In a world that is often toxic and dangerous ... *the Lord heals all my diseases.*

In a world that is filled with death ... *the Lord keeps me from the grave.*

In a world that is often cruel ... *the Lord blesses me with love and mercy and fills my life with good things.*

Belief looks at the world, as it is, the complex tapestry of joy and disappointment, great pleasure and great pain, enchanting beauty and terrible suffering, and sees the signs of a God who is merciful and loving. What signs?

It is a sign of a merciful and loving God that the world still exists, that humanity still exists.

It is a sign of a merciful and loving God that great evil does not go unchallenged, that there are voices that speak up and bodies that stand up for justice and for righteousness and for peace.

It is a sign of a merciful and loving God that love still exists. It is a sign of a merciful and loving God that love still exists, still persists, even in the face of hatred.

A colleague of mine pastors a UCC church in Campbell, California. A week ago, on a Saturday night, their church sign was vandalized with a spray-painted message: *Fags to Hell, God Rules*. Theirs is a church, like ours, that extends an open invitation to all: *No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here*. The rainbow fish on their sign, a symbol of their welcome of all people, including gay and lesbian and transgendered people, was painted out.

The next Monday, a work party from the church joined together, to clean up the sign and to go out into the neighborhood,, volunteering their services for clean up and yard work! And they added a new sign to the church property, one which reads: *God loves you. We do too*. They were determined to respond to the act of hatred with an act of love.

The spirit of their response was very different from the spirit of an e mail forward I received this week:

When I hear a story about a brave marine roughing up an Iraqi terrorist to obtain information, know this: I don't care.

When I see a fuzzy photo of a pile of naked Iraqi prisoners who have been humiliated in what amounts to a college-hazing incident, rest assured: I don't care.

When I see a wounded terrorist get shot in the head when he is told not to move because he might be booby-trapped, you can take it to the bank: I don't care.

When I hear that a prisoner, who was issued a Koran and a prayer mat, and fed "special" food that is paid for by my tax dollars, is complaining that his holy book is being "mishandled," you can absolutely believe in your heart of hearts: I don't care.

And oh, by the way, I've noticed that sometimes it's spelled "Koran" and other times "Quran." Well, Jimmy Crack Corn and - you guessed it - I don't care!!!!

What is especially sad is that this message was purportedly written by a person of faith, someone who emphasized the importance of faithfulness to God. My response to the e mail was this: *It is hardly Christian to say that you don't care at all ... about any other human being. What was it Jesus said? "Love your enemies ..."*

When we do, when we love even our enemies, when we do not let hate breed hate, when we pay back hate with love, when we let nothing and no one turn us aside from our duty and our honor of loving each and every neighbor as we love ourselves, it is a most powerful witness that a merciful and loving God does indeed exist!

Do you recognize the signs of a loving and merciful God in your life? I cannot speak for you, only for myself, but as I look back over the way I have come these fifty-four years, I can trace the finger of God all the way. The signs of God's love are unmistakable. The Lord has filled my life with good things!

*The Lord is merciful and loving,
slow to become angry and full of constant love ...*

Love is hard work. If you have loved anyone -- a husband, a wife, a son, a daughter, a friend, a neighbor -- you know that. Love comes easily and quickly at the beginning, but over the long haul, love is hard work.

Love is tested and prodded and pushed and pulled, it is bent and bent some more, again and again, almost to the breaking point ... and still -- you can tell us! -- love is resilient, love springs back, love hangs in, love goes on, bending and adjusting and still embracing.

And then sometimes, love is pushed past the breaking point. Love's heart is broken and love lies in ashes. And then sometimes -- can you tell us? -- love rises from the ashes and keeps on loving still!

That is what God's love is like: *The Lord is full of constant love ...* Constant because it keeps on going. Constant because it doesn't come and go, ebb and flow, but stands strong and steady and lasting.

As much and more than any loved one has ever disappointed you, we have disappointed the Lord. As much and more than any loved one has ever hurt you, we have hurt the Lord. As much and more than any loved one has ever betrayed you, we have betrayed the Lord. We have rejected him and ignored him and spited him and doubted him and defamed him. And still, *the Lord is merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love.*

To me, the most extraordinary sign of God's love is this: that God allows the world to go on as it is. What many see as the strongest argument that God does not exist -- bad things happen, good things happen, stuff happens -- is for me a most remarkable sign of a most remarkable love. God lets us do it! God lets us try to get it right! God allows us time and room to grow up!

The loving God invites us to walk in his way, but, because of love, will not compel us to walk it. Out of true love, out of a desire to win our true love, God is willing to do the very thing that casts his own love in doubt.

And so it is easier, much easier, to be an unbeliever, to judge by appearances, to love only those who love us back, to take the world as it comes for as long as we are fortunate enough to occupy it.

It is hard work, it takes courage and fortitude, to believe in God, to put all our hope in God's future, to love the way God loves us. But that is what I choose to do, to cling to the One who is merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love. I choose his way. Which way will you choose?