

THREE QUALITIES OF FAITH FOR OUR TIME

Luke 24: 44-53; Acts 1: 1-11

What does a child need to grow up healthy? A child needs many things. From physical provision to mental support to emotional and spiritual nurture, a child needs many things to grow up healthy. But is there one word that can capture all these needs together? There is. It is love. A child needs lots of love and the kind of love that is focussed on the child. Genuine love is other centred. Genuine love feeds the self by feeding others. We receive back what we give and the more genuine the love we give, the more genuine the fullness we receive back. From nurture and support, to discipline and boundaries, to building up faith in their value, worth and ability, a child cannot grow up healthy without genuine love in all its manifold other-centred dimensions.

Sadly, there are all too many children in the world and in our own communities that don't get what they need to grow up healthy. From abuse to neglect to everything in between, when children do not receive the kind of love that nourishes healthy development, they are crippled emotionally, mentally, spiritually and sometimes physically, especially in parts of the world or in contexts where poverty or abuse and neglect undermine any such development. The challenge in adulthood, then, is an undoing of damage, and then a rebuilding of a healthy sense of self. Not easy. Even with all the resources at our disposal, it's not easy at all.

Thankfully, for all our parents' imperfections, many of us have had enough love to build on, and even as our emotional, spiritual and mental development is an ongoing journey, we are not having to start from scratch.

Now, I say all this because it is also true that at some point, our healthy development does involve a separation and detachment from our parents. Even as our parents will hopefully always be there for us, at least those of us who have positive relationships with our parents, as we grow, we also begin to detach ourselves in order to build our own differentiated selves. Our choices are now our own and we must begin to take responsibility for our own choices. Unless and until we begin to take responsibility fully for who we are, we will never become who we can be in all our created potential as adults.

And this process of detachment and independence begins at different stages for each and everyone of us. Of course, there are key developmental stages for all of us. Our teen years, for example, are critical. And sometimes it's also about the times we live in. There are times of life where things happen around us that have the kind of life-changing potential for all of us in some way. What times in your life and mine have been key moments where we've had to learn to take responsibility for our lives and our life-choices in new ways? I think the time we're living in today is such a time for many of us. The world looks and feels different, and

even when the time comes where there are no longer any social restrictions, what, if anything will have changed for us? Will such change be positive, negative or indifferent? Is there something we can do that can make this time fertile time for positive change to happen for us and through us into the world around us?

There is... And in order to flesh out what we need in order to be ready for positive change, let us explore our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom and guidance.

Both readings come from the same author, even as they are different books. The gospel is part 1 and Acts is part 2 of one story Luke tells. The gospel account ends, and the book of Acts begins with Jesus leaving the disciples, or “ascending.” Even as he promises to always be with them spiritually, he is leaving them in the flesh. And so, they must grow up and take responsibility for their own choices, their own lives and how they will bear witness tangibly to the vision and mission of Jesus in the world. It’s a pivotal time for them, but also a fearful time. Having Jesus with them to guide them, uphold them and reassure them was so necessary. But now that he’s leaving them in a physical way, will they have enough faith, hope and love in them to carry out the vision and mission of transformation in the world beginning with the community that will build around them?

Jesus promises them something special is coming to give them the nurture and strength to carry on and move forward. Next week is Pentecost Sunday and we will hear all about the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit that’s coming. But in order to prepare for such a coming, the disciples then, and we disciples today, need to be in the right inner space. How do we position ourselves internally in times of transition, uncertainty, stress and fear? How do we position ourselves so that meaningful transformation may become the way we will describe this time years from now? How do we prepare our hearts and minds so that we’re ready for the change that’s come and is coming so that it’s positive change?

Well, it’s all about faith. Without faith we’ll just give up and give in to fear and despair. Without faith there’s no reason to get up in the morning. The disciples then, and we disciples today, need faith in what’s possible in order to be in the right inner space for positive change. But what, exactly is faith? Well, faith has many aspects to it. Let’s call them qualities. But there are three qualities in particular that are critical for how we will live through this time of Covid-19. There are three qualities of faith that we all need in order to position ourselves for positive growth in fearful times. What are they?

My inspiration in drawing out these qualities of faith come from a Christian mystic named Simone Weil. Weil didn’t live through a pandemic. But as a French Jew in the 1930s and early 40s, she lived through the growing threat and persecution of the Nazis and then as part of the French Resistance. Weil writes about qualities of faith that are essential not only for surviving difficult times of fearful transition, but of making such a time fertile time for inner growth. Like the disciples letting go Jesus’ hand, like children letting go their parent’s hand,

like us having to grow up fast and face life in a whole new kind of world in this time of Covid-19, what kind of faith is it that we need?

First of all, we need to learn how to ‘pay attention.’ Paying attention means becoming attuned to listening. This means we need to still the noise around us and within us. We need to stop talking and learn how to listen. Attention is also about learning how to focus and concentrate. In this digital age it’s very hard not to be constantly distracted. Our attention span is ever so brief and our focus is divided by multiple things that demand our attention all at once. And not only that. Once we have multiple things demanding our attention, we will zero in on those things that are easiest, most convenient and least uncomfortable, demanding or confronting.

Paying attention is about learning how to listen and concentrate on one thing, and this one thing is often the one thing most needful, the one thing that is the most important thing we need to face, to learn, to confront, to wrestle with and work through. Paying attention is never wasted time, but we must make the time. We must create the space to listen. In this day and age, that takes serious intention and work. How good are you at paying attention? How ready are you to pay attention? This is where God is calling you. Faith is first and foremost about paying attention, trusting that such attention will pay off in the end, even as it may take some time and bring on difficulty and discomfort until we reach our destination.

Second, faith is about openness. Life is not a linear journey. It’s about creating greater and greater openness past those areas, situations, fears and relationships that push us to close in on ourselves, close in our hearts, close in our minds, even close in our bodies. You need to have faith to open up. You need to believe good things will come if you open up your heart and soul. With attention, we also need to learn how to open up in ever greater and deeper ways... toward others, especially others who are different, others who introduce us to different perspectives. We need to open up to different ways of doing things and believing things. If attention is difficult for us, openness is even more so. It’s so easy to lose trust and shut down. It’s so easy to try to keep control and be suspicious. But so many things most needful for our growth and transformation require faith as attention and faith as openness.

Finally, Faith is about trust. And trust requires that we remove conditions on others. Obviously there are situations and persons we cannot trust or be open to for solid reasons. But what about a larger trust in what will be? What about a deeper trust that sees beyond the immediate difficulties, discomforts or suffering that we are currently undergoing or will undergo?

Trusting is also a relational term. We trust in a situation, we trust into the future, we trust what we cannot yet see... but we also trust a person. There is always risk in this move to trust a person. Even as our trust has been confirmed with the person many times, each new

step of sharing, giving and openness to receiving involves risk. And without such risk, no growth and no deepening of relationship is possible.

And so, the kind of faith we need in this in-between time, this time of fear and uncertainty, this time of waiting for the gift Jesus promised to send his first disciples and the rest of us who follow in their footsteps, this time requires the posture of faith. It requires learning the discipline of paying attention. It requires openness in ever newer and deeper ways. And it requires trust.

Simone Weil taught these things, but in her day, she was not taken seriously. She was working for the French resistance, but they felt that what she was talking about was not practical. Paying attention, openness and trust don't get results now. They don't lead to concrete action and tangible change right away. Sadly, Weil died before the war ended. She never got to see how her ideas have become such a source of inspiration and wisdom for so many writers, thinkers and those prepared to invest spiritually over the long haul so that deeper transformations may come.

What about you and me in this time of Covid-19? We do not choose the times we live in. We cannot see what the future will bring. We have high hopes for a vaccine and for things returning to something like they used to be. But most of us also realize things will never be the same. How do we position ourselves now so that this time will lead to positive growth in time for us and through us in the world around us? We need to be intentional about paying attention. Do you need to create space, perhaps at a certain time of the day, using a certain ritual to create inner room for yourself to pay attention and then digest some solid spiritual food?

And what about openness? This is not a time to shut down and close in because we're afraid of any kind of discomfort and uncertainty. Quite the opposite. This is a time to open up and see the wider expanse that is life's possibility. We have not chosen this time and the circumstances we each must face. But we may choose how open we will be to what can come to be and how we may be a part of it.

And finally, we need to learn and grow our capacity to trust ever more deeply in this time. We need to trust what will be, but we also need to trust in people. This requires discernment, but is also requires risk. How will our trust not shrink but grow in this time so that our inner selves may expand rather than shrink?

As we prepare for the visitation of the Holy Spirit, may we position ourselves internally so that we maximize our spiritual growth. The world needs us, those around us need us, we need us. God wants to shine into the world through us; Amen.