

The St. John's Pulpit

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IT JUST DOESN'T MAKE SENSE

Acts 7:51-60 and Gospel of John 14:1-14

Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 14, 2017

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Beloved, The Living God loves you, and there is nothing you can do to alter this reality!

You live into this reality as you gather in this sacred space Sunday by Sunday.
You serve God by helping this local church be healthy and by serving the needs of others.
You nurture your relationship with God through prayer, scriptures and spiritual practices.
Active Faith is how you live; anything less just doesn't make sense to you.

However, when you scatter from this sanctuary, you find people living by other perspectives.
You trust that God loves you; but you live among people who do not understand God's love.
Some refuse to express a belief in God at all, because it just doesn't make sense to them.
Some do not join you in living with unbridled compassion; it just doesn't make sense to them.
Some reject the idea of a personal relationship with God, as it just doesn't make sense to them.
Some cannot grasp how you can believe Jesus reveals the way to the truth about life in God;
it just doesn't make sense to them.

Some have miserable lives and carry heavy burdens trusting in lesser gods like superstition and economic security because obeying The Living God just doesn't make sense to them.

Some suggest that to live by faith is to lose touch with all of your senses and instincts.
Yet, experience tells you that living by faith calls you to use ALL of your senses and instincts.

Here are 3 ideas to keep in mind as you express your Active Faith among people to whom it just doesn't make sense?

1. LIVE AS A CREATION OF GOD; YOU WERE BORN TO EXPRESS FAITH AS COMMITMENT.

Nicholas Wade is a former science reporter for the *New York Times*.

In his book, *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures*, he traces the history of religion as a force for social good and foretells potential paths for religion's future.

He argues against the idea that secularism will triumph over organized religion.

He also proposes foundational changes must occur in organized religion as our human community becomes more scientific, socially inter-connected and ecologically interdependent.

While he acknowledges there can be a cruel, violent and evil side of religion,

the vast majority of religion's influence has shaped human experience for the better.

He cites several scientific research studies proposing what he calls "*an instinct to believe.*"

He suggests the 'instinct to believe' is in human DNA and explains why religion will endure.

He notes that even those who reject all organized religions still search for spiritual transcendence.

In other words, people NEED TO BELIEVE in something and make choices or commitments.

Scientists working in the human genome project found that human choice exerts as much power in evolution as do randomness, mutation, drift and selection.

Human choice is expressed as commitment.

In other words, evolutionary science is finding that the human story is less about survival of the fittest and more about survival of the finest commitments made through the faith instinct.

LIVE AS A CREATION OF GOD, YOU WERE BORN TO EXPRESS FAITH AS COMMITMENT.

A second way you can express your Active Faith among people to whom it just doesn't make sense is:

2. LIVE YOUR FAITH KNOWING THAT GOD'S MESSAGE CAUSES CONFLICT.

Please understand me; I am not proposing you go looking for conflict.

However, when you live your faith committed to God's message of gracious compassion, you will occasionally be involved in conflict.

Earlier in worship, Evelyn read a story about commitment and conflict.

Our story is the concluding scene of Stephen's sermon which resulted in his martyrdom.

Stephen was the first person to be selected as a deacon by the Christians in Jerusalem.

Deacons were needed due to conflict between Hellenistic Christians and Jewish Christians.

Hellenistic Christians were people who spoke Greek; Hebrew or Jewish Christians did not.

Possibly, some Hebraic Christians looked down upon Hellenists in the faith community.

Even if they did not, the Hellenists expressed they were being neglected by the Apostles.

Certainly, there were language and cultural differences, and they were not getting along.

Stephen was a Greek speaking Hellenist; full of graciousness and a positive spirit; an easy pick.

It was customary in the Synagogue of the Freedmen (or Hellenists) to have debating speakers. Once, while Stephen was preaching, some of the Hellenistic Jews argued with him.

They could not withstand the wisdom presented by Stephen; so, they plotted against him.

A Hellenist named Saul of Tarsus was their instigator.

Basically, Saul was the head of the secret police trying to kill off the Jesus movement.

The false charges against Stephen were that he spoke against Moses and God.

Stirring up the people, they arrested Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin Council.

When religious freedom is denied, persecution, violence and death ensue.

After Stephen was charged, the high priest asked him to speak.

Stephen began with Abraham and traced God's story of faithful grace through to Jesus.

He did alright while he was appealing to the pride of their shared heritage.

In fact, he did fine up to, "*The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands.*"

Their body language shifted and evil intent was clearly revealed. Stephen started 'name-calling.'

"You stiff-necked people, uncommitted in your hearts, forever opposing the work of God; like your ancestors who killed the prophets, you have now killed the Righteous One."

We are not told exactly why Stephen changed his demeanor.

Maybe Stephen read the tea leaves as to what would happen and decided he would have his say.

The Hellenists became enraged and started making hissing sounds.

Stephen gazed into the skies and said,

“Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

With that, they grabbed him up, dragged him outside the city to stone him to death.

On their way out, like pitchers removing their warm-up jackets in the bullpen, they freed up their rock-throwing arms by dropping their cloaks at Saul’s feet.

As stones fell on Stephen, he saw a new life beginning; but it didn’t make sense to rock hurlers.

Like the Lord of his faith, Jesus, the Christ of God, Stephen forgave those who were killing him and entrusted his future to The Living God through Active Faith.

Although Saul approved their killing of Stephen, no doubt Stephen’s message rattled around inside of Saul and the message would rise again as Paul, the missional apostle.

In other words, Stephen’s message did not make sense to Saul...until it reached his faith instinct.

God’s message may seem to be killed off and buried; but God’s message always rises again.

Still today, people are being martyred; and their blood becomes the seed of Active Faith.

They are being martyred because of their commitments to a relational commitment to God.

Psychiatrist Gerald May distinguishes between willfulness and willingness. Willfulness is control by manipulation through over and above positional power. Willingness is immersed into commitment to a relational mission, through surrender and vision. In martyrdom, the willing are killed by the willful.

Theologian Richard Niebuhr referred to commitment as ‘*new mindedness.*’

He describes Jesus as ‘*a God-shaped*’ person calling his followers into ‘*new mindedness.*’

In this commitment of new mindedness, or discipleship, we also become God-shaped.

As God-shaped persons and a God-shaped community, we are guided by a higher vision.

Like Stephen, you take your Active Faith into a troubled land knowing conflict will result.

When you share the message of God’s love, you call people to a higher vision;

and strange as it may seem, it just doesn’t make sense to some people sometimes.

A third way you can express your Active Faith
among people to whom it just doesn’t make sense is:

3. LIVE YOUR FAITH KNOWING JESUS OVERCOMES DISCOURAGEMENT WITH HOPE.

In the Gospel story, read by Dr. Martha Kearse, Jesus is offering his farewell discourse.

Simon Peter was already upset because Jesus had told him that he would deny knowing Jesus.

Jesus had told the disciples that change was coming; their time together was now short.

Jesus’ realized his followers were experiencing spiritual conflict; their hearts were troubled.

So, Jesus said, *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”*

These words of Jesus are interesting because they can be interpreted in two ways.

Language scholars tell us they can be interpreted as indicative words or imperative words.

If Jesus meant these words to be indicative, he merely offered them as a suggestion.

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”

However, if Jesus meant these words to be imperative, then he stated them as a requirement.

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”

I claim these words as imperative in my life of Active Faith; and I encourage you to do the same.

In his message of transition, Jesus commands Active Faith by assuring them of eternal hope.

And, with this imperative statement, Jesus provides a promise with no expiration date.

Basically, Jesus said, *‘If you are following me, then I will be always be going ahead of you.*

I will soon go ahead of you to my Father’s House where there is plenty of room for everyone.

I go now to prepare a place for you and you know the way.’

To Thomas, Jesus’ words just didn’t make sense.

Blind spots are hard to see.

Thomas voiced his cognitive dissonance, his lack of understanding, his low flame of hope;

“We don’t even know where you’re going; how can we know the way?”

Jesus responded, *“I AM the way to the truth about life in relationship with God.”*

Phillip then jumps up with his demand, *“Before you go, Jesus, show us God the Father; that will satisfy our curiosity; yeah, yeah. Then, all of this will make sense to us.”*

Jesus responds, *“Phillip, good grief man; have I been with you all of this time and you are still saying, ‘It just doesn’t make sense?’ Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”*

The entire Gospel of John is based upon John 1:18 – *“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made God known.”*

You follow Jesus because he leads you to the Father’s heart, which is like a compassionate mother.

Beloved, you go forth into a troubled world; but let not your hearts be troubled.

Express your Active Faith among people to whom it just doesn’t make sense.

Live as creations of God, born to express faith as commitment;

Live your faith knowing that God’s message causes conflict; and

Live your faith knowing Jesus overcomes discouragement with hope.

Believe in God. Believe also in Jesus who rekindles the flame of hope within you.

Louise was a religious girl; always in church meetings. The church people loved Louise.

But, one day, when Louise was only twelve, all that changed. A man attacked Louise one afternoon, holding a knife to her throat and forcing himself on her. Those same church people shut Louise out when it was discovered she was going to have a baby. I guess the compassion of God just didn’t make sense to them. At the age of thirteen, Louise gave birth to a daughter.

When Louise's baby daughter grew up, she wrote in her autobiography:

I never was a child. I never was coddled, or liked, or understood by my family. I never felt like I belonged. I was always an outsider. I was born out of wedlock, but I had nothing to do with all this. Nobody brought me up; I ran wild as a little girl. My mother never wanted me and my coming almost killed her. It was natural for her to resent me, the child she had conceived against her will and desire. I was told that God was up there in heaven watching me. I would look up and try to see Him. When things went wrong with me I'd get mad at Him because He was falling down on His job of looking after me. That daughter of Louise was married off at age thirteen. She worked in hotels as a dishwasher, cleaning woman and waitress. She always loved the Lord, but life was full of trouble.

By the time Louise's daughter was seventeen, she was a blues singer. She sang mostly in Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia. After a terrible accident, she was unable to walk. She sang the Blues in small theatres while she recuperated. Later, she performed in theatres in New York City and appeared in Hollywood movies.

After decades of estrangement, she went to visit her mother Louise, in 1948. By that time, she had sung for presidents, in Carnegie Hall and on many stages. But, she described her visit with her mother to be the most important experience of her life outside of her relationship with God.

Louise looked at her daughter and said, *"I'm glad you've come. You've been a good girl. You know God and He has His arms around you."*

That daughter of Louise was used in the mission of God in many ways. Most likely she was used in the mission of God most when she walked to a stadium microphone during a Billy Graham crusade and Louise's daughter, Ethel Waters, would sing:

Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come?
Why should my heart be lonely? And long for heaven and home?
When Jesus is my portion; My constant friend is he,
His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me.

I have asked for Wes Watts to help us conclude this worship of The Living God this morning. Wes will bless you with his ministry in song. However, Wes is not singing for you; so you shouldn't applaud him. You are not Wes' audience; he is not an entertainer. He is singing for an audience of ONE. Wes' solo offering to God provides you with an opportunity for prayerful reflection. As he sings to the Lord, consider how your experience of God's love just doesn't make sense. The Living God loves you, and there is nothing you can do to alter this reality.

When Wes finishes offering his solo gift to God, I will conclude this sermon with a prayer.