

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut  
Week of October 4, 2006

### **The Point of Belief**

Time and again I find myself bemoaning what seems to be virtually a law of human nature: passionate commitment is found only at the extremes of the social and political spectrum. Is there a law that there can't be a passionate, committed moderate?

Thoroughly buffeted by disasters of nature and human malevolence or inattention, Candide decides at the end of Voltaire's story to withdraw, "to cultivate my garden," in an eighteenth-century anticipation of a theme-song of the late nineteen-sixties. Reasoned debate requires too much energy.

Are we in such a time and place now? I cannot remember a time when so much corruption in politics and the higher echelons of the business world was met with so much cynical resignation, with so little outrage. The pedophilia scandals in the Roman Catholic Church, and of late in the Congress, provoked consternation and reaction; but the abuses of power that pivot around money and power, abuses that impair a much greater number of lives, produce the feeblest of efforts to demand ethical accountability in corporate boardrooms and the corridors of Congress.

A great sigh of cynicism has gone up from the land. Why bother? "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity," W. B. Yeats wrote in 1919, as civil war loomed in Ireland.

I believe in right and truth and justice and reason, in God and goodness. So what? My belief and five bucks will get me a really nice cup of coffee.

That's why I am so grateful for people who are moderate and reasonable, able to listen to other reasoned arguments—and are passionately committed to justice and truth. People who are committed to the Way of the Cross as the Way of Life; and who would die for it—but not kill for it. Who hunger for truth and knowledge and enthusiastically share the freedom and power that truth brings.

My beliefs are important to my interior life, to my spiritual and emotional health, and they surely affect and indeed effect the salvation of my soul. But until and unless my beliefs are expressed in my life, they do not change objective reality and are powerless to effect the salvation of the world.

That is why the Epistle of James, read in these late summer Eucharists, insists that what we do matters so much, that faith without action is incomplete.

Yet at the root and foundation of action, belief is vital. Belief counters cynicism, for hope is implicit in belief. And belief that is responsive to reason and conditioned by humble prayer can alone shape right action. Have we ever needed passionate, rational, committed moderates—Episcopalians by definition—more than right now?

—Rev. Ben Brockman

**St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut**  
**Week of October 11, 2006**

**Returning--Labyrinth**

The early Church baptized many pagan symbols and practices, giving Christian meaning both to central mysteries like Holy Eucharist and baptism itself, and to more peripheral ones like Christmas trees and holy springs. The Labyrinth now back at St. Paul's, inscribed on the floor of our parish hall beautifully and lovingly by John and Andrew Ogletree and Allen Hubener, is one of these remnants of our pre-Christian past that has powerful value for Christians. We will dedicate it at the Forum on Nov. 5.

Medieval Christians who walked the Labyrinth at Chartres, on which ours is modeled, experienced it as a symbolic pilgrimage to Jerusalem or other holy place—Canterbury, for example, where the relics of St Thomas Becket drew hosts of enthusiastic pilgrims. They understood that the center of the Labyrinth symbolized Jerusalem, the *umbilicus mundi*, the navel of the world. Thus the large and small scale pilgrimage represented the journey of the soul from its creation by and in God to its termination in God.

Children are especially drawn to the Labyrinth. Perhaps they understand intuitively what we have to reflect upon. So I invite you to walk, and to reflect on a few things as you do. First, note that the Labyrinth is not a maze. A maze is designed to get you lost. A labyrinth has a beautifully complex geometric design, but if you have eyesight and sufficient light, or a guide to lead you, you can't get lost—provided you stay on the path. You begin facing directly toward the center, which represents the mystery of God, Immediately the path turns away, just as our lives so often turn away from God.

And if someone else is ahead of or behind you on the path, you will meet them going in a direction opposite from yours. Yet you both are heading to the same center point, symbolically the still point of love around which Dante described the universe turning.

And if you focus on simply putting one foot in front of the other, walking slowly, breathing deliberately, and staying on the path, the experience can be deeply meditative and calming, like the practice of centering prayer. Often enough, at the end, insight and understanding that we had not consciously thought about emerge.

Lately, I have come to understand another benefit. It has to do with the sharp turns of the Labyrinth. You reach the end of an alley and reverse course. Time and again you turn, always toward the center.

This constant turning is, I believe, the essence of prayer and the spiritual life. Because it is impossible to be focused on God continually, the power of prayer does not lie in maintaining a constant connection with God; but rather in our frequent returning to God, as often as we become aware that our attention has wavered or our devotion grown cold.

“In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength,” said the prophet Isaiah (30:15). Returning is the vital word.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

**St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut**  
**Week of October 19, 2006**

**Losing Your Faith**

Sooner or later it happens. The God you knew from childhood and church really let you down. And not just about the scrapes and bruises of childhood or the jolts of adolescent relationships. But about a matter of life and death. Maybe even about something that mattered even more than your own life.

God didn't fix it and you endured an agony that left you gasping, exhausted, and sure that if God existed, then God was a monster. No justice in what you endured. Not even mercy or pity, just sheer suffering, relieved finally by death.

The world in which things make sense lay shattered around you. Nothing you or anyone else did deserved what happened. And God did not stop it. Faith in a God who fixes what we want fixed dies. You've lost your faith.

Suffering like that puts a person in the unhappy company of one of the great biblical figures, Job. In the space of a few narrative paragraphs, he loses his property and possessions, then his children, and then his health. As he sits stupefied in mental and physical agony, he blasts the day of his birth and wishes his existence undone.

His wife loathes the sight of him and urges him to "curse God and die." Friends show up and inform him that he must have done something to deserve his suffering.

Job's replies constitute one of the great teaching moments of the Bible. He agrees that no human being is perfect in God's eyes, but denies that he has ever displeased God. And he demands that God come out like a man and tell him face to face otherwise, if indeed he has offended God.

Job's patience is legendary, but inaccurate; he is patient only in the literal sense of the word, that he suffers. What does characterize him is anger, anger at God and anger at his friends' unjust accusations.

But he does not curse God. Indeed, he says, "Though God slay me, yet will I trust God." And in a glorious moment God—who, the Bible says appears only to the righteous—shows up and addresses Job and explains not Job's suffering but God's immensity. "Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth, when the stars danced for joy? Did you appoint the boundaries of the sea, or cause the dew to fall in the morning?"

Job's response now is silence, and awe. And the story concludes with God restoring Job's material goods in even greater abundance, and blessing him with children again.

A troubling conclusion if you take it literally. But an illuminating one if you understand it symbolically.

Words fail before the immensity of God, the grand and awful complexity of things. Silence is the only adequate response to looking upon the face of God. “The Lord is in the holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:20).

The thread of possibility that kept Job from cursing God is transmuted into a more glorious way of being in the world, symbolized by the restored family and possessions. The faith we end up with after great trials is real faith. Whatever came before was just practice and anticipation. We have to lose our faith to find it.

—Rev. Ben Brockman