

Shortly after the War, our family moved. We moved out of a new housing development constructed to support the steel mill where Dad worked to a much older, established town about five miles down the road. I was seven years old. I quickly found friends among the neighborhood children and in the process discovered that the children's gathering place was on my next door neighbor's porch on summer afternoons. Rufus and Maggie Morris were a childless couple, but "Uncle Rufus" was our best playmate. He did magic tricks, told lots of stories, and obviously loved children. On summer afternoons, we knew that we could always find Rufus with his shoes off cooling down on the front porch after a hard day's work at the Texas Pipeline Company located down the street. When Rufus wasn't playing his fiddle, we knew that he was always good for a few tricks, stories, or games.

One summer afternoon my friend Ann and I were playing in the front yard as birds fluttering around in the trees. Rufus decided to have some fun. He told us that we could catch the birds if we sprinkled salt on their tails. I was certain that this was probably another good trick, so I ran home to get a salt shaker. Of course Mother wanted to know where I was going with the salt shaker from the kitchen table. When I told her what Rufus said, she just smiled and said, "OK." I wondered why she smiled, but I soon found out when I came home for dinner with zero birds.

Rufus was never malicious, but he loved to tease. We were innocent, naive, and gullible. Children were a perfect audience for Rufus's tall tales and practical jokes. I think that the bird incident was when I began to learn the value of skepticism. If I wrote a story about my journey of faith, I would call it "Gullible's Travels." Growing up in faith, I eventually had to live in a world bigger than Rufus's front porch. I eventually had to learn that a real Christian faith is not a fantasy world of believing anything and everything. In Lewis Carroll's fantasy novel for children *Through the Looking Glass*, the White Queen, aside from telling Alice things that she finds difficult to believe says that in her youth she could believe "six impossible things before breakfast" and counsels Alice to practice the same skill. Unfortunately believing the impossible is still the meaning of faith for many Christians.

Faith is one of those words that stands at the center of the Christian experience, but it is probably the most misunderstood and distorted of the words we use in church. Paul spoke for me when he wrote: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways (1 Cor. 13:11)." Faith and fantasy are not synonymous.

Faith is bigger than WHAT we believe. In a seminary theology class the discussion had gravitated to the essentials of Christian belief. Someone asked whether one must believe the virgin birth of Jesus. I recall the class chuckle when our professor commented that his Christian journey began at a point in life when he did not know what a virgin was. Yet, Fundamentalism grew out of a reaction to modern science labeled "modernism." In reaction to the challenges of science to traditional biblical teachings, Fundamentalists reduced the Christian faith to essential doctrines to which one must subscribe, including the absolute, inerrant truth of the Bible in matters of science and history as well as religion. Is that the meaning of faith—agreement without question of a few theological statements or biblical content? Does faith require agreement with the Pope, the Church, the pastor, or the Bible?

William Willimon tells about attending a theology lecture by a Roman Catholic priest in the 1960's. One of the students stated that he could not agree with one of the statements of Church Dogma. The priest told the young man not to worry about it, to just accept the teaching of the church and eventually he would come to believe. Let the Church believe for you. Is that the meaning of faith? Is faith acceptance of what the church teaches regardless of either uncertainty or understanding?

Counted among the New Atheists, Sam Harris wrote *The End of Faith* to describe a world come of age. Noting that the names God and Allah must go the way of Baal and Apollo, Harris insists, "Faith-based religion must suffer the same slide into obsolescence (p. 14)." Harris arrived at a simple conclusion: "the truth is that religious faith is simply unjustified belief in matters of ultimate concern—specifically in propositions that promise some mechanism by which human life can be spared the ravages of time and death (p. 65)." In chorus, the New Atheists agree that faith is *belief without evidence*. They "believe" that faith is a carryover from childish gullibility and that Santa, the Easter

Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and God share a common reality.

Perhaps you remember the popular song from the middle of the last century “I Believe.” It seemed so deeply spiritual that it found its way into church and became the defining anthem for religious faith: “I believe for every drop of rain that falls, A flower grows. I believe that somewhere in the darkest night, A candle glows. I believe for everyone who goes astray, someone will come, To show the way. I believe, I believe.” This was the pop faith of my youth. Some saw past the phony surface to call it what it was, “faith in faith.” Norman Vincent Peale had his own version called positive thinking, that if you hold to positive thoughts you will get positive results. Crystal Cathedral’s Robert Schuller and Houston’s Joel Osteen developed their own forms of positive thinking, but essentially they assured “believers” that faith is about believing in faith.

In a British newspaper article Richard Dawkins noted that he had seen religion as harmless nonsense before the attack on the World Trade Center of New York. After 9/11, he came to see that religion can be lethally dangerous because it gives people unshakable confidence of their own righteousness and the false courage to kill themselves and others.

Douglas John Hall observed (*Christian Century*, Jan. 11, 2011, p. 30) that Dawkins was essentially right in his description of religion and that his statement could be favorably compared to the Prophet Amos (5:21ff) in denouncing the cultic pomposity of religion: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

The problem with the popular idea of faith is that it fails to connect with the core biblical bond to God. From the earliest pages of the Old Testament faith is not about believing impossible things. It is seldom about believing “things” at all. It begins with a covenant bond between God and the creation, a bond of committed trust between a personal God and persons made in the image of God.

Biblical faith is a bond of committed trust. Anyone who reads the New Testament is aware of Paul’s arrogant certainty of his own grasp of the truth. Paul frequently demands that his reader agree with him and damns anyone who departs from his definition of orthodoxy. He was particularly critical of the orthodox legalists disturbing the Galatian churches. The issue was circumcision. Paul concluded (5:6), “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

Even old arrogant Paul sets the bar of faith higher than doctrinal uniformity. According to his own testimony, Martin Luther discovered the high meaning of faith while reading Paul’s letter to Romans. Luther discovered the Protestant principle of Justification by Faith in reading Romans 1:16-17, “the one who is righteous will live by faith.” Luther found a new meaning of faith as a way of life rather than an affirmation of dogmatic propositions worded by the Church. Like Paul, Luther could be an authoritarian, struck with his own possession of the last word of truth; but in his struggle with the Church of his time, he had to distinguish the meaning of faith from simple agreement with pope, Church, or even Luther.

Paul reached for an illustration of what it means to live by faith and landed square on the experience of Abraham. The covenant by which Abraham was bound to God could not be reduced to a few doctrinal statements satisfactory to religion. Faith could not be put in commandments chiseled in stone demanding absolute obedience. Faith could not be bound between the covers of a theological treatise called “Church Dogmatics,” to cite Karl Barth’s great work. Faith could not be reduced to scientific facts proven by human senses and conforming to human reason.

For Abraham, faith was about trusting the promise of God. Abraham’s faith defied knowledge and rejected certainty. He lived following the call of God into strange places where nothing was certain, and he died without receiving the promise that he lived for, but Abraham’s whole life could be summed as a life of faith. It meant trusting the God we cannot grasp. Augustine wrote: “*si comprehendis, non est Deus* –If you understand, it’s not God.” Faith and fact are miles apart.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer rejected the towers of Babel that we are building out of our religion, institutions that could stoop to cooperation with Hitler and demonization of a whole race of people. Faith had to

be bigger than our institutional forms. While affirming religion in a general sense of the word, Paul Tillich looked toward the day when people will be released from their bondage to the burden of religion. Maybe that is what is meant by a new generation that keeps saying, "I am spiritual but not religious."

Jacques Ellul called faith a caustic substance that puts to the test every element of this life and society, sparing nothing. Faith leads to questioning certitudes. It forbids attaching ultimate significance to any expression of human activity and detaches one from money and family and becomes the surest road to realizing that the only thing I know is that I don't know anything.

Marcus Borg (*Speaking Christian*, 118ff.) perceived that *faith* is one of those words that has become so polluted with extraneous ideas that it needs a total new form. He noted the Old English origin of *belief* as *be loef*, which means "to hold dear." So Borg prefers to capture the meaning of faith in the verb form of "beloved." Faith means to *belove* God. It is a bond that exists only between persons and is totally out of place when one is speaking of things or even ideas. In marriage most of us find a lot of common ground in shared experience, political ideology, life philosophy, and religion; but marriage is never rooted in absolute agreement. We can *belove* one another and hold contrasting opinions on matters of common ignorance.

As the People of God, we can hold different theological opinions about very important matters of our religion and continue to *belove* one another. We can recognize with Paul that we see in a glass darkly waiting for the time when we can see as we are seen and know as we are known. In other words, we don't really know any *things*. But we live by faith, by trust in a loving God who is guiding the creation toward the promise of fulfillment.