

The story is told about a woman who died and went straight to Heaven. But before she could get in, she had to answer 3 questions from St. Peter. He asked: “What are the days of the week that begin with the letter T? How many seconds are in a year? And what is God’s first name?” She had to really think for awhile, and then told St. Peter she was ready. So he said, “All right, what are the days of the week that begin with the letter T?” She replied, “There are just two of them—Today and Tomorrow.” St. Peter was thinking Tuesday and Thursday, but he decided that was an acceptable answer. He then asked, “How many seconds are there in a year?” She said, “There are 12 seconds in a year—January second, February second, March second, and so on...” Again, St. Peter was surprised, but realized that was a good answer also. Then he said, “OK, now comes the hardest question of all. What is God’s first name?” Without hesitation she replied: “Andy.” St. Peter exclaimed “Andy! How in the world did you come up with that?” She said, “Everyone knows that, why they even wrote a song about it. ‘Andy walks with me, Andy talks with me Andy tells me I am his own!’”

I realize that some of you have heard that joke before, and some of you don’t even know why that is funny at all, because you have never heard the hymn “In The Garden.” But the point is this: our God “Andy” is unique in the realm of spirituality. Our God is not a distant deity, far removed from our concerns here on earth. Our God is a personal God, a God who knows us and loves us. Our God is described as one who notices when a sparrow falls to the ground, who has numbered the hairs on our heads. Ours is a God who hears our prayers and knows our deepest cares. We are here this morning because we have faith in just such a God, and we believe, along with the author of Hebrews, in the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. We are here because we are people of faith.

Faith is a gift. It is as hard to define as love or truth or beauty. Faith involves trust and hope, and a great leap, in the language of Soren Kirkegaard. It is offered to a God who longs to be in relationship with us. Faith allows us to worship God, so that we can stop worshipping ourselves. It reveals a God who has a tender heart, who rejoices when we rejoice and suffers when we suffer. Faith is not simply the belief that God exists, but the trust that God is actively involved in human affairs. Faith hopes in the future, faith is tenacious and enduring, faith is courageous, and it cannot be coerced.

Most of all, the gift of faith causes you to see the world in a different light. It invites you to look at yourself, others, and all creation through the lens of tenderness and compassion. It invites you to care about things and people far beyond your own circle of influence, to love what God loves.

Unfortunately many people do not view it that way. They consider faith a weakness, and religious people as annoying or superstitious. Our culture portrays religious faith, particularly the Christian faith, as irrelevant, and Christians themselves as hypocritical. Of course, every single day we have evidence that they are correct, don't we? When we lived in Colorado Springs I served on some comm. groups with Ted Haggard. I found him to be a decent and caring man, and I am stunned & saddened by recent developments. The best we can do is leave the judgement to God and pray for him, his poor family and his church. But we must also pray for ourselves, for we all tend toward hypocrisy. Let our prayer be that our lives will always have integrity and give glory and honor to the cause of J Christ.

Has anyone noticed that we are in an election season? Automated calls, ugly? Our current political landscape would suggest that we are a deeply divided nation, and we have constant reminders of that division during these final days before the election. And yet, in spite of all of the appearances that we are bitterly divided country, there is a strong yearning for a mainline, intelligent, civil approach to both faith and politics. A recent survey of Americans revealed that only 9% identify themselves as a part of the religious right, and just 7% identify themselves as part of the religious left. That is not that many people. In our country there is a huge middle ground in the areas of both faith and politics. Jim Walls wrote a book a few years ago entitled, "Why the Right is Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It." This wonderful book is about the failings of both the left and the right, and the stunning lack of concern for the poor and oppressed on both sides of the religious and political spectrum. Wallis writes about how distracting and harmful this bitter extremism has been for our beloved country. He quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from the Nazi Prison camps that people of faith "...must see the great events of democratic society from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, from the perspective of those who suffer." That is how Christians need to look at the world, always advocating for the defenseless and weak. I hope we can all remember that as we go to the polls next Tuesday: the defenseless and weak.

While there will always be people on the political and religious extremes, there is a huge middle ground, and that is why mainline churches like ours are so

vitaly important. Mainline Protestant Christianity offers a faith perspective which is distinctive and unique. We offer those values and beliefs that so many intelligent people are hungry for. You see, we believe in the importance of science and reason, in the sovereignty of God, and the free will of humankind. We believe that the Bible is both a human document and divinely inspired. We believe in both grace and holiness, in our ability to become perfect, and our great need for help. We believe in utilizing both the heart and the mind in our approach to matters of life and faith. We believe it is fine to question, to doubt, to wonder about God. We are both liberal and conservative—liberal in the best sense of the word, being open, generous, tolerant. And conservative in the best sense of that word, wanting to preserve what is sacred, valuable and honorable. We embrace tradition, yet we are open to change. We consider Christ our Lord and Savior, but we have enormous respect for other religions, and do not condemn them as misguided or wrong. We have found a path that leads to abundant and eternal life, a faith which gives us hope and purpose. And we need to invite others to experience this precious gift of faith which God has provided for us.

Faith is a gift, and it makes all the difference in determining how you get through this earthly vale of tears. I cannot imagine a life without a belief in God. I would not want to get out of bed in the morning if I did not believe, with all my heart, that there is something more to this life, and someone beyond the grave.

Of course, the incredible beauty and uniqueness of our faith is found in just one simple truth. God wears a human face. Our God is accessible and appealing. In Phillip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing About Grace*, he writes about a postcard he received from a friend that contained only six words. It said: "I am the one Jesus loves." When asked about it later, the man referred to the disciple John, identified in the Gospels as the one whom Jesus loves. He said that if you could have asked John who he was, he undoubtedly would not have said, "I am a disciple, apostle, evangelist, the author of one of the Gospels." No, he would have said, "I am the one Jesus loves." Then Philip Yancey wrote, "What would it mean if I too came to the place where I saw my primary identity in life as the one Jesus loves? How differently would I view myself every single day?"

What about you? How would your self-perception be transformed if you thought of yourself not in terms of your work, or your skills, political affiliation, or relationships, or even your sins and shortcomings, but simply as the one Jesus loves?

That is the amazing gift of faith. It sets you free because it constantly reminds you that you are dearly loved by a God who will never let you go.

I recently learned of a TV reporter who went to a remote African village in

order to film a documentary on a tribe that was still living in the most primitive conditions imaginable. After the filming was finished, he decided to present the Tribal Chief with a television, so that the tribe could watch the documentary when it aired. He had a TV delivered to that small village, and set it up in a community gathering place in the village. The reporter left to go back home, but returned to the remote region about a month later to tie up some loose ends. He noticed that the television was covered with a blanket and not being used at all! He asked the Tribal Chief, "Don't you like the TV?" He replied "Oh yes, we liked it very much, in fact we gathered together to watch it every single night. But after awhile we decided to shut it off." "But why? Don't you like it's stories?" "Oh yes, it has amazing stories, incredible stories. But we wanted to shut it off so that we could go back to listening to our tribal storyteller."

"Why?" the reporter asked, dumfounded. "Why would you prefer your storyteller to the TV?" "Well," said the Tribal Chief, "...that TV sure knows lots of interesting stories, but the storyteller knows me." The storyteller knows me.

The God who created you knows you, and loves you. Remember, you are the one Jesus loves.

Let us pray...

Gracious God:

Thank you for loving us even when we cannot love ourselves. Thank you for the gift of faith, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen. Thank you for your endless desire to be in relationship with us, as demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ. May he live in us and we in him, through the holy sacrament we are about to receive. Amen.