

Church of the Crossroads
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 29, 2007
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LIVING BY FAITH AND NOT BY SIGHT

John 10:22-30

Once again, I have tried my best to journey through this past week with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in another, as Karl Barth urged us to do. I took some interest in the first Democratic candidates' debate held this past Thursday in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Following the debate, the pundits wasted no time in commenting on the performance of the candidates. A major focus was given to the performance of the two front-runners, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, and one question in particular. The question had to do with the possibility of another terrorist attack such as the one that occurred on 9/11, and how the candidates would respond. Hillary Clinton said, "I think a president must move as swiftly as is prudent to retaliate. If we are attacked, and we can determine who is behind that attack, and if there are nations that supported or gave material aid to those who attacked us, I believe we should quickly respond." Barack Obama's response to the question was more cautious. He said that we would have to "make sure that we've got an effective emergency response." Then we would need "to make sure that we've got good intelligence, a) to find out that we don't have any other threats and attacks potentially out there, and b) to find out, do we have any intelligence on who might have carried it out so that we can take potentially some action to dismantle that network." Obama added, "But what we can't do is then alienate the world community based on faulty intelligence, based on bluster and bombast. Instead, the next thing we would have to do, in addition to talking to the American people, is making sure that we are talking to the international community."

The pundits commenting on these responses declared that Hillary Clinton sounded "presidential" where as Barack Obama did not. Apparently, it is more presidential to "move as swiftly as is prudent to retaliate."

I was downcast. I wondered whether or not we have learned anything since 9/11. Apparently, retaliation is still the preferred option when it comes

to acts of terrorism. We still do not, it seems, want to know why we are so hated. It's easier to resort to retaliation, even knowing, as we do, that in our kind of world violence only breeds violence. The promise to retaliate is deemed "presidential." Then, I thought about the teachings of Jesus and the Apostle Paul, both of whom urged an ethic other than retaliation. "Love your enemy, turn the other cheek," taught Jesus. And, quoting the Hebrew scriptures, St. Paul urged Christians to leave any kind of vengeance up to God. I really do wonder whether one can be both President of the United States and a professing Christian at the same time.

I am reminded that the Christian faith, inasmuch as it remains true to Jesus, stands in marked contrast, if not opposition, to the ways of the world, and the ways of power. Today's reading from the Gospel of John seems to support this conclusion. There are those who do not belong to the community of Jesus. They cannot hear him or follow him. Then, there are those who do belong to the community of Jesus. They hear him and follow him. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

As those who hear the voice of Jesus and do our best to follow him, we often experience the world as an alien place. It is a place filled with retaliation, and violence, injustice and misery. We would rejoice if a presidential candidate were to espouse an ethic reminiscent of the Gospel. Yet, as Reinhold Niebuhr once reminded us, that may be too much to expect. What we hope for is not easily fulfilled in our world.

But then, if our hopes were fulfilled, we would not have need of hope. Nor would we have any need for faith. Hope, after all, is not fulfillment. Faith, after all, is not sight.

Simply because Christian faith is faith and not sight, we who follow Jesus are going to have to do a lot of waiting. Faith is not about having, not about seeing, not about knowing, not about grasping. It is trusting in Jesus and his way of compassion and non-retaliation. It is a waiting upon God. I would like to quote Paul Tillich, who, spoke of the nature of faith in his little book *The Shaking of the Foundations*. This is what Tillich said (and let us remember that Tillich did his writing before the age of inclusive language):

The condition of man's relation to God is first of all one of *not* having, *not* seeing, *not* knowing, and *not* grasping. A religion in which that is forgotten, no matter how ecstatic or active or reasonable, replaces God by its own creation of an image of God. Our religious life is characterized more by that kind of creation than anything else. I think of the theologian who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within a doctrine. I think of the Biblical student who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in a book. I think of the churchman who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in an institution. I think of the believer who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within his own experience.

- *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 148-52

Wise words from the past. My friends, we should not expect a presidential candidate, who must prove, it seems, that she is tough in order to be elected, especially because she is a woman, to represent a fulfillment of the Gospel ethic of love. At the same time, we might hope that she recognizes a contradiction between what she espouses and what Jesus taught.

We live by faith and not by sight. That is a truth of the Christian faith. It was for this reason that in John's Gospel, so many of the religious people who came face to face with Jesus cannot bring themselves to believe in him. They, after all, being faithful Jews, are looking for the Messiah, and they want to know, for certain, that Jesus is the One whom they seek. "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus could have said, "Yes, I am the Messiah," but he did not. In fact, nowhere in this Gospel does Jesus declare that he is the Messiah. Why? I like to think that it was because he wanted his listeners to come to faith rather than rely on sight. If he had declared himself to be the Messiah, then those good religious folk could have said, "Finally, the Messiah has come. Now, we have found him. We have him, right here before us. He is now ours." The Gospel writer refuses to give in to this need for sight and fulfillment. What is important for the Gospel writer is not some description for Jesus, such as "Messiah," that can be grasped plainly and conclusively. What is important for the Gospel writer is the deep, abiding relationship between Jesus and God. For this reason, Jesus in this gospel is portrayed in ways that cannot be easily grasped. He is the Good Shepherd. He is the Light of the world. He

is living Water. He is the Bread of Life. He is the Resurrection. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He cannot be possessed. He cannot be had. He can only be heard and followed. And that requires belief, the Gospel of John's word for faith.

Christian faith is not an easy path in our world, simply because it is wrapped up in faith, in hope, and in waiting. It oftentimes seems all so discouraging. Yet, there are signs that are given along the way, signs that the Gospel is alive and well in our world. For me, such a sign was given this week. Thanks to the work and witness of FACE, the tireless efforts of the residents of Kukui Gardens, and some wise legislators, both Democrat and Republican, as well as the commitment of our governor, the housing at Kukui Gardens will remain affordable for the next fifty-five years and beyond.

Such signs give us courage and say to us: "Let us continue to listen to Jesus and follow him." The Gospel can indeed take hold in our world. And so it is, even in the midst of discouragement, even though the kind of world we we Christians hope for seems so illusive and far off at times, there are times when signs of new life are given. And so we will hold fast to faith and hope. We will continue to wait upon God, trusting as we do that in the end, in the words of Julian of Norwich, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Thanks be to God.