

ON FACTS AND FAITH - A Sermon by Dan Stern, BCUCC, August 12, 2007
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 & reference to doubting Thomas text in gospel of John

“We live in a material world – and I am a material girl” – says Madonna. She may be a fading pop icon, but what she’s saying is hard to deny. Americans seem to be insatiably materialistic. And even among those of us who genuinely try to live simply: we too like the kinds of things we can see, grab hold of, tinker around with, adorn ourselves with – things visible, beautiful, functional, measurable, durable “the grain of wood, the key of stone.” It’s natural to want to pay attention and stuff we can see with our own two eyes. After all, seeing is believing. Right?

But faith, says the New Testament, is...the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we cannot see. By faith, we see the world, called into existence by God’s Word; what we see, created by what we don’t see.

James Hilman in *The Soul’s Code: In Search of Character and Calling*, suggests that we need in our society to “get back to the invisibles.” Things we do not see may be the very things that determines our destiny. Subatomic particles. DNA. Electrons, leptons and quarks. And...the presence of a living though invisible God!

Of course, invisible things can mislead and deceive too. Invisible ideals can serve the greater good or can make false claims, lead us wrongly into war. Some hunches prove wrong. We make unfair accusations, we issue rash dismissals, we fall in love with the wrong person, bet on the wrong horse, send the innocent ones to prison or the firing squad.

Sometimes it’s a matter of thinking we see things that aren’t real just because we want to see them. Wishful thinking has to be distinguished from genuine hope.

Remember the Peanuts episode where Lucy is in her usual position in right field when suddenly a batter hits a fly ball to her. ...She looks to catch it, only to have it drop behind her. She saunters up to the pitcher’s mound, gives the ball to Charlie Brown, and says, “Sorry I missed that one, manager. I was hoping I’d catch it, but hope got in my eyes.” I don’t think it was hope, I think it was wishful thinking.

The Dilbert comic strip also illustrates this. The conniving Dogbert decides to become an optometrist specializing in patients he considers ‘nearsighted visionaries’. “They’re ideal customers,” he says, “Because they never expect the worst. So holding up an eye chart, he asks his first patient which price he’s most likely to charge, and the optimistic patient says, “They low one.” Right! Then later, Dogbert gives a corporate CEO a pair of ‘glasses’ made of solid wood. “Is this better or worse?” he asks. “Better,” says the CEO. “I foresee 40 quarters of solid growth.” We tend to believe what we want to believe, and see what we want to see.

And then – at least equally deceiving – sometimes folks focus on the horrible and exaggerate the bad. With frequent color-coded provocation, a lot of people of late think they see terrorists at every airport, under every bush. When we’re afraid, we do exaggerate the bad. We see bad things

and bad people everywhere. If he wasn't such a little meany, Dogbert probably could have specialized in nearsighted pessimists instead. When we're afraid, we'll buy anything.

And precisely because it is so easy to be led astray by fear or by wishful thinking, for centuries, organized Christianity has attempted to 'discern the spirits' by balancing intuition with longer-term experience. We've been right to check the authenticity of both overly pessimistic and overly optimistic claims through the wisdom lense contained in scripture. We've also striven to get accurate facts. Taking science and history seriously as a church community is important. It's smart. Mere facts aren't sufficient, they are never the whole picture. And yet both, faith and facts when at their best, play on the same team.

Most of you know that I was selected to serve on a jury recently. At first, nearly all of us felt that we were being terribly inconvenienced, but gradually came to appreciate what an honor it was, doing our civic duty in a participatory democracy. Out of a total jury pool of more than 75, fourteen of us were chosen; two would be declared in the final minutes of the trial to be alternate back-up jurors only. None of us knew who those two would be, in order that we'd all take seriously our responsibility to listen well and get clear about the facts of the case. We were to determine whether evidence provided us proved the defendant was "beyond any reasonable doubt" guilty of a number of somewhat complicated criminal charges. Over the course of more than a week, we did listen carefully to a variety of witnesses; we also got somewhat acquainted with the other jurors. Finally, after hearing both lawyers' closing arguments, I was feeling quite certain that the defendant, though clearly guilty of the lesser charges, had not been proven guilty of the most serious alleged crimes. And I was very much looking forward to our deliberation process. But at the last minute I learned from the judge that I was one of the two to be singled out as the alternates, and was dismissed from the actual team discernment process. The remaining jurors took two full days more to deliberate, and in the end, after convincing all holdout for acquittal to change their votes found the defendant guilty of the most serious felony charges I doubt the decision was based entirely on factual evidence. Some jurors had hunches making them want to acquit, others – to convict. Would things have been any different had I, who had been leaning toward acquittal been part of the discernment process? I don't know. I wonder.

I'm told, by the way, that the defendant became quite pale when he heard the jury foreman announce that he had been found guilty of nine charges against him. That night I dreamed I was myself the defendant, being led away to prison. Then, since I'm a glutton for punishment, the very next evening, I drug Sam with me to see a local theatrical production of Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*. It only added salt to my wounded sense of uncertainty about the outcome. Sure, it could be that the defendant in the trial I witnessed was as guilty as Dostoevski's Raskolnikov. Maybe I'm one of Dogbert's nearsighted visionaries, soft on crime. I wanted to have faith in the judge and the jury deliberation process, but for me, doubts persisted. I just didn't think his guilt had been proven.

In one of our Sunday morning book studies recently, we read about and discussed Dostoevski's real Christian life experience – how early in his adult life, he underwent a virtual resurrection. He had been arrested for belonging to a group judged treasonous by Tzar Nicholas I. After spending eight months in jail awaiting sentence, suddenly on a frigid morning three days before Christmas, the so-called conspirators were ordered out of their cells and carted to a public square where to

their horror an official read the sentence condemning them to death. They had no time to absorb the news, and no possibility of appeal. A firing squad stood at the ready. Bareheaded, robed in white burial shrouds, hands bound tightly behind them, they were paraded through the snow before a gawking crowd. A clerk pronounced the words, 'The wages of sin is death' to each prisoner, and held out a cross to be kissed. The first three selected to die, Dostoevski among them, were tied to posts. At the very last instant, as the order, "Ready, aim!" was heard, as drums rumbled and rifles were cocked and lifted to shoulders, a horseman galloped up with a prearranged message from the czar: he would mercifully commute their sentences to hard labor in Siberia. Since he was considered a member of the nobility, Dostoevsky had a sword broken over his head as a sign of shame. One of the three prisoners fell to his knees crying, "The good czar! Long live our czar!" Another had a mental collapse from which he had never recovered. In a very different way, Dostoevsky, the third prisoner, never recovered either. But he had peered into the maw of death, and from that moment life became for him precious beyond all calculation. "Never has there seethed in me such an abundant and healthy kind of spiritual life as now," he wrote. "Now my life will change, I shall be born again in a new form." And it was true! He thus began his most creative and prolific period as a writer, even while imprisoned in the harshest reaches of Siberia. (from *Soul Survivor* by Phillip Yancey)

Concerning the consequences of the trial I witnessed: Will the one for whom I saw no certain evidence of the felony charges leveled against him, while imprisoned, turn his life around for the better? Stats show this to be unlikely. Doing hard time rarely facilitates genuine rehab, let alone authentic faith conversion. More often, just the opposite occurs – incarceration breeds increased criminality. I don't know if justice was served. Whether rightly convicted or not, I want to believe that this man's sentencing could be as it was for Dostoevsky, a death – resurrection moment making life precious beyond calculation. Is that wishful thinking? Maybe. But I do know this: Faith and facts are not sworn enemies. When faith is mature and the facts accurate, we get closer to the truth with a capital T. Because what we see and what we don't see are ultimately part of a single whole.

The soul cannot be seen under a microscope; particles of light cannot be quantified, and often, we see the acorn only, not the oak, or vice-versa, not making the connection between the two. We see surface things. We catch fleeting glimpses, see through a glass darkly, or even, like Dogbert's nearsighted optimist, through a thick block of wood! What we see is not necessarily what we should believe in either! "Don't put your faith in things moths corrupt and thieves steal from you," a man named Jesus once said.

Could we ever accomplish or decide anything at all if we had to see it before we would believe in it? Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Our faith ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, kept their eyes peeled and their spirits focused on that unseen city with eternally real foundations – that City designed and built by God, earth and heaven's architect. People of faith can suffer, be maligned, and even die, not yet having in hand what was promised, and yet, still believe. How is this possible? People of faith see home off in the distance, and wave our greeting to it daily. Doing so gives us the strength to accept it that we will be transients in this world, strangers, sojourners for a long, long while, longing for our true

home. But God is proud of us when we sustain that holy longing, believing in the things not yet seen that will one day be for all. Let it be so, Amen.