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The Long Haul

I think "faith" is one of those words that gets used so much it becomes watered down and we lose track of what it actually means. At a friend's prompting, I've been thinking about faith a lot lately as it relates to what I'm doing here.

But I'm having a problem with this because 1) a lot of the time, even now, I'm still not sure what I'm doing here; and 2) I'm not sure what faith is.

I went to the Episcopal catechism looking for a definition and found none, but found that the catechism itself is called an "Outline of Faith." Hmm, interesting. So does faith mean stuff we're supposed to believe?

I remember in the 60's, after the two Kennedy brothers were assassinated and there were countless stories about the tragedies of the Kennedy kids - retardation and deaths violent, tragic, and too young. Rose, their mother, was always asked how she endured this. She always said she has a strong faith. I didn't know what that meant. Did she mean faith made it not hurt so bad? Did she mean it was awful but faith told her it was somehow ok anyway? All for the best? In God's plan? I didn't know what she meant when her response to her children dying was that she had strong faith.

I knew it had something to do with God, though. And I think she meant despite all that really, really bad stuff she still believed in God.

As it is frequently expressed, faith seems to be about that . . . belief in something undetectable but undeniably, unwaveringly, uncontestably good. (Like wind? Electricity? Santa Claus?)

So I guess that when these terrible things happen, faith keeps us from wondering what God is up to or whether God is at all. That somehow, it's all what - acceptable? meaningful?

So I suppose I must be having a crisis of faith. Because this has been my struggle for much of the time I've been here. On mission, God is smack in the center of things. For some people, God is the subject, for some the object. Or the verb, or adverb, or adjective. Different for different people, but God is definitely in the narrative somewhere.

But it seems on more days than not here, God is most notable by apparent absence. A lot of bad stuff goes on here. People are being hurt badly. And other people are doing the hurting. And still more people are supporting the people who are doing the hurting, even encouraging it. Where is the ultimate good in that? Where exactly is God in dying children?

The truth is that I am an awfully lot more aware these days of the other guy - the one with horns and forked tail. I see him real clearly here.

And yet – and here’s where I get real confused – I stay on here. Along with all these other people who don’t like these things either. I don’t know why. It’s hard and it’s unpleasant and it’s sad and it’s tiring and it’s maddening and it’s sickening.

I was talking to my spiritual director recently about a decision to do one thing or another and I found myself saying that one of those choices didn’t seem “faithful.” Where did that come from? I of little faith was choosing to act faithfully.

For me, in that instance, it meant acting authentically. Acting in a way true to the purpose and intention of coming here in the first place, enduring, and staying on. I don’t know what that has to do with reacting to children dying, but I think it has something to do with it.

On mission, we learn that answers will rarely come. That certainty isn’t likely. That comfort in your previous beliefs and values will be cold comfort. But that you just have to keep going anyway.

With faith.

Follow Harry Gunkel in Jerusalem on his blog at <http://missiontojerusalem.blogspot.com>