

In the Conversation
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
August 8, 2010
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Isaiah 1.1, 10-20;
 Psalm 50;
 Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16;
 Luke 12.32-40

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the novelist Anne Rice. She is perhaps best known for her vampire novels. I first read her after she returned to her Christian roots and began writing novels about the life of Jesus. Well, she announced on her face book page a week ago that she was leaving the Christian church and was doing so in the name of Christ because she could not abide any longer belonging to an institution that promoted so much division and was grounded in teachings that she could not defend either from scripture or from reason. It's an indictment that I suspect a number of us have some sympathy for. A number of journalists raised the question of why she doesn't simply find a place where her views are more fully embraced and she has said that for her, for now, it is the entire conversation that she needs to walk away from.

Anne Rice is only the latest and certainly not the first to leave the rituals and hypocrisy of institutional religion disgusted. If the opening of Isaiah is to give any indication, God is portrayed as rather disgusted with the whole business at times as well. When worship goes hand in hand with iniquity - when those who profess faith practice deceit in business, abuse in relationships or neglect for the poor, God is as disgusted as any cultural critic could ever be. When what we profess in worship is not enacted in life we have a huge credibility problem.

Of course people leave for other reasons as well. When teachings of the church become dogmatic and overly simplistic, when you feel as if you must check your mind at the door in order to belong, credibility of a

different kind comes into play. Each of our passages for today from Isaiah to Hebrews to Luke continue to engage the question Gordon raised last week: what is at the heart of our faith? These are questions that are not just raised by biblical texts, they are clearly being raised in our cultural conversations as well.

When I listened to Gordon's sermon from last week, I was delighted to discover that I agreed with him entirely. (That's always fun to say about your colleague!) Gordon was right on in his insistence that faith at its core is not first about the bad things we avoid or even the good things we seek to do. Faith at its core is not first ethical in nature. Ethics flows from something deeper. And, as Isaiah makes clear, ethics do matter! It's just that faith is about more than just being good or being nice or not being bad. Faith speaks first to much deeper questions - to the question of Being itself.

Who is God and how does that help us to understand who we are? As Gordon suggested God is the One – the One who creates and knows and loves us. Jesus adds, in the gospel of Luke today, that God is the One whose good pleasure is to give us the kingdom. Who are we? We are the ones whom God knows, the ones whom God loves, the ones who are invited to trust that it is God's good pleasure to give to us the kingdom. What a difference it makes to live life with that kind of expectation.

The book of Hebrews begins its iconic definition of faith in just that way: "faith is the assurance of things hoped for". As the passage unfolds, so much of what is praised in these Old Testament figures of Abraham and Sarah is the way that their faith was expressed through a profound trust in God. A trust that propelled their life in directions they would never have sought out for themselves. They held this expectation that God would use their lives as the starting point for a blessing that would keep cascading: moving through space (from one end of the earth to the other) and moving through time (from one century to the next). It was a blessing that is still reverberating outward and onward and forward. Their faith was not perfect. Go back and read the Abraham and Sarah cycle in Genesis 12-25. They got distracted and derailed multiple times but they kept coming back to the hope they held. They kept alert (that's the language from Luke today) and on the lookout for the movements and possibilities of God.

I appreciated one author's reading of Luke and what it means to be alert. He reminds us to hold this teaching (to be dressed for action and ready for service and alert at all times) with the opening words of our passage which were "do not be afraid little flock"¹. This isn't a call to a form of anxious vigilance. We are invited to keep our eyes open for opportunities to give generously and to receive abundantly. That's what I was talking about with the children today. It's a kind of orientation in life - a generosity of spirit - that's not just about possessions although it is about possessions. It can also be about time and attitude – the ways that you offer forgiveness and grace to people. It's about cultivating our "peripheral vision"² - to be alert to what is happening on the edges. When our "faith is the assurance of things hoped for" and the things that we hope for are shaped by the things that God wants for us (that is part of the purpose of prayer as we talked about it two weeks ago) then that gap between what we do and say in here and how we live and move out there hopefully gets smaller over time.

But faith is about more than just our hope and expectation; it is also about our convictions: the content of our beliefs. Eventually, as the saying goes, faith seeks understanding.³ We are to love God not just with our heart and soul but also with our mind. We ask certain questions about who God is and who Jesus was and what the nature of the church should be. That inquiry leads us to articulate the beliefs that we hold with conviction. That is a part of faith; our conviction of things not seen. Where we fall is when we fail to see the provisional nature of those beliefs. Theology is our best effort to express our convictions in the moment and we are meant to keep asking questions and to let our understanding of God and of God's Word deepen and develop over time.

Harvey Cox, in a book he wrote called *The Future of Faith*, makes a distinction between faith and belief: "We can believe something to be true without it making much difference to us..." So you can have a hold list of

¹ David J. Schlafer, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 339.

² David J. Schlafer, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 339.

³ This is attributed to Anselm by Daniel L. Migliore in his book, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 2.

doctrines: God created the world, Jesus is the Son of God...without any of it making one iota of difference. "We can believe something to be true without it making much difference to us, but we place our faith only in something that is vital for the way we live."⁴ Good theology makes the case for why our beliefs are vitally connected to the ways that we want to live. It helps, I think, to see ourselves as participating in a conversation that started long before we entered the scene and will continue long after we are gone. So even if you are in place where you have very few assurances about anything; even if you cannot muster much of any "conviction for things not seen"; even if you feel yourself to be in a place of doubt, you can at least stay in the conversation. If we stay engaged in the conversation, then there is some hope that we can keep our peripheral vision alert for God's presence and movement among us. You never know when those unexpected moments will arrive when our faith will feel solid again and we will see and know that God is real and with us. When God will suddenly set a feast before us and invite us to join in the celebration.

This table which is set before us is meant to be a pledge and a foretaste of just that kind of feast...a feast of love of which we shall partake when Christ's kingdom has fully come...a feast, that when our eyes are open, we will discover God is laying before us over and over again.

So come – for all things are now ready.

⁴ Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2009) 3.