

Getting to the Essence of Faith
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; I Corinthians 8:1-13

February 1, 2009

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I have a dilemma. It's been a dilemma for me for a long time, but it's gotten worse since the inauguration of our new president. I'm sure great care went into every aspect of the inaugural ceremonies, the ceremonial prayers being no exception. There were three official prayers. One was offered by an evangelical mega-church pastor. One was offered by an openly gay Episcopal bishop. And the other was offered by a venerable civil rights activist.

The prayer that drew the most media interest was the one offered by the evangelical mega-church pastor, Rick Warren. His prayer was deliberately framed to be inclusive. It included the Jewish Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one," from Deuteronomy 6:4. It included the description of God used by Muslims, "You are the compassionate and merciful One." It also referenced the civil rights struggle, mentioning Martin Luther King, Jr. It addressed freedom, justice, forgiveness, responsibility, humility, and included a prayer for the protection of the president and his family. Rev. Warren ended his prayer in name of Jesus, pronouncing the name of Jesus in Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish, and English. Politically it was a homerun.

Do ceremonial prayers bother any of you? More and more I struggle with the purpose and validity of ceremonial prayers. Even the title "ceremonial prayer" is troubling. Theologically it's an oxymoron. I find myself asking, Whom are we addressing with this prayer? Are we really addressing God, or is it a mini speech pitched to God but really addressed to the people?

According to Jesus, prayer issues genuinely from our souls and is directed only to God. That's why Jesus told us to go into our closets when we pray. Pray in private, he said, and the God who hears in secret will answer. He drove his followers to the essence of faith. Not ceremonial religion. Not religion for show. Seek the essence of faith.

Here's my dilemma. I've been asked to offer the prayer at the Huntsville City Council meeting this Thursday evening. Our new mayor will be there, city council members, and interested parties from our city. How is this, except in scale, any different than what happened last week in Washington, DC?

I've concluded that it's not different. It's essentially an invitation to offer a ceremonial prayer. It would be political death for someone to suggest that council end the practice. Can you imagine the controversy that would erupt? So I'm going to offer the invocation, but here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to make a very brief spiel about my belief in prayer and my uncomfortableness with ceremonial prayers. And then I'm going to lead the city council in a moment of silent prayer. After I have addressed God silently on behalf of the council members, I will say aloud "amen."

They may be wondering as I leave, "Who is that nut?" That's okay. I don't care. For me it is an effort to not allow faith to get sucked into a political vacuum.

How do we get to the essence of a faith? It was a major issue the apostle Paul addressed with the Christians in Corinth. Their issue was food. Some pagan religions of their time offered animal sacrifices to their gods. The meat then was sold to vendors who then sold the meat in the public markets. Some Christians in Corinth argued that Christians should not eat that meat. Since it had been offered in a pagan ritual to a pagan god, it was spiritually tainted and not worthy of Christian consumption. Paul called the ones who held this position "weak." He considered them to be immature in their faith.

Others claimed that idols were really only pieces of wood and stone. You could dance around them, bow before them. You could even give them a hug and kiss, but they were still only pieces of wood and stone. So the food was not corrupted. It was still lamb or ox, and was good for eating. But those people, whom Paul considered to be the more mature in their thinking, had to be careful of pride. They looked down on the others, thinking them to be lesser persons. They got "puffed up." Genuine love, Paul said, "builds up."

So how do you get to the essence of faith? Paul concluded that he felt perfectly free to eat meat offered to pagan idols. His conscience was not

troubled at all. It was just meat. But out of love for his “weaker” friends, Paul said that he would not eat it.

Paul was reaching into the heart of our faith and attempting to balance freedom and responsibility. Liberty and love. The essence of faith, what is a real, genuine with faith, requires complete freedom. And it requires complete love.

We see no better picture of that than on the cross. “Let this cup pass from me,” Jesus prayed. It could have. Jesus was completely free. “Yet not my will, but thy will be done.” Complete love.

Today we remember that cross. We do so with two elements: wine and bread. When our deacons serve you and as you wait while others are being served, remember the One who lived the essence of faith. And pledge to live so yourself.

Confession before the Table of the Lord

Lord, do not let us do more if in doing less we might do it better. Do not let us acquire if in living with less we might know You better. Forgive us for spreading ourselves so thin that we miss the Baby in the stable, the Lad in the carpenter’s shop, the Teacher on the hillside and the Christ on the Cross. Hear our silent prayers of confession: