

Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world“ (Mt. 28.19-20).

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,
Amen.*

The text I have chosen is not often used at the start of a school year. I have chosen it because it was the text of my last sermon at Gustavus, sending off the class of 1960 into the world. Returning here after half a century, I cannot but ponder how we have done at the task of *teaching all nations*.

It is, I fear, rather a sorry sight. In my country, once the cradle of the Reformation, religion today appears simply irrelevant, at most a naïve tale for not overly bright children. In your country, the loudest defenders of religion claim that that is indeed what religion is, proclaiming that the world came into existence at the time of the first pharaohs and that all its animals survived in a wooden boat built by Bill Cosby. Religion has been used as an ideology by some of the most regressive and repressive regimes the world over. Small wonder that few intelligent people of good will still take it seriously!

Where did we go wrong? Could it be that we have been so busy believing that we never stopped to ask what faith really is? Passing years have taught me that faith worth holding starts not with belief but with doubt. As long as life is routine, what was good enough so far still seems good enough. Why bother thinking about it?

The search for faith, I would submit, begins when something, be it joy or grief, explodes our routine. Suddenly, nothing is obvious, nothing sure, nothing is necessary. All that we love and are hangs by the thinnest of threads. A vast *Nothing* might just take over.

That is the dark night of the soul whereof Martin Luther spoke. Then against the dark shadow of all engulfing doubt stands out the stunning fact that though there need not be anything, *there is something, not nothing*. Though nothing need be, yet something is. Perhaps it is wholly fortuitous random contingency, *full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*. Or perhaps it is a miracle, an immense, unearned gift.

That is where both irony and faith begin. Irony is human response to reality encountered as wholly fortuitous contingency. Faith is equally human response to reality encountered as a wonder and a gift. Which is it? God knows, though the person of faith might think that that *something* is testifies that reality is not random. That it is *on the side of being* against *Nothing*. Were universe random, *Nothing* would long have prevailed.

Not that such arguments matter a whit. What matters is that life and all that is is a wonder and a gift. For anyone who has experienced that, faith means being surprised by joy, overwhelmed by gratitude – and by an urge to *pass it on*, since sharing the joy is the most spontaneous way of thanking for the immense gift of there being something, not nothing. That is the ultimate reality of faith and the most effective witness to it.

Those of us who think ourselves Christian share in that reality. From the Hebrew Scriptures we have learned to speak of it as God and to personify its mighty acts in history. From the New Testaments, especially from Matthew 5 to 7, though if Martin Luther were not listening, I should add my beloved Letter of James, we have learned how to order our lives.

The central event, though, is the event of Jesus who for us is the Christ, the Saviour who on the cross lived out for us the dark night of the soul and in his resurrection acted out awakening into wonder. We all cherish those images, and justly so.

Still, beware! Though precious, those are but the outward and visible signs of an inward and invisible reality. They become drained and vain when they are not filled with the reality of lived faith and attested by joy, gratitude and service.

Perhaps that is where we of my generation have gone wrong. Do not repeat our mistake. Go forth into the world with thanksgiving, rejoicing in the power of his Spirit!

AMEN