

THIS I BELIEVE
by Larry Blades

I was asked to give a short talk on the topic “This I Believe.” I don’t feel qualified to give a sermon, or even advice for that matter, so please just consider this a conversation on a topic I thought you might find interesting.

A principal theme running throughout Pastor Diane’s sermons is the peace and the strength in adversity that can be found through trust in God. The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians [4:7] says that “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ.” This passage refers to the inner calmness, promised to one who has a thankful attitude based on unwavering confidence in God. Such trust in Him brings about a peace that transcends both human intellect and human analysis.

Every once in a while, Pastor Diane has referred to coping with those recurrent doubts about faith which for many of us arise from time to time, and can interfere with the peace we are seeking. Is there really a God? Is there an afterlife? What is my purpose in this life? Are my prayers really heeded? How much of the New Testament actually recounts true events, or makes sense? and so on. I would like to share my thoughts on coping with those doubts.

It seems to me that the concepts of a god, of an afterlife, of wanting to conform with such higher purposes, are hard-wired into mankind; they appears in all places, in all societies, throughout all history. Archeologists have even found burials at least 70,000 years old where the deceased had been painted with red ochre and carefully interred with equipment, in obvious contemplation of an afterlife.

History shows that although these hard-wired concepts persist, they continuously evolve. They are conceived, and answered, in accordance with the knowledge, location, and culture of the society which expresses them. I think cultures have tended to envision their gods as having powers and motivations which are a reflection of that culture's own circumstances, its own values, and its own understanding of the universe. My favorite summation of this idea is from the early Greek philosopher Xenophanes who observed that if horses could speak, they would imagine their god to act as horses do. Perhaps another more personal example from that ancient time is Aristotle's concept of God, the "unmoved first mover," which seems to me to be very much a reflection of Aristotle's own aspirations, for his God is conceived of as pure thought.

I think it obvious that mankind has always also had doubts about these eternal questions, and those doubts have evolved in a similar fashion.

Today, we grapple with the eternal questions in the context of a scientific age which has revolutionized mankind's understanding of the universe, the world we live in, and history. Our universe, as we now understand it, contains billions of galaxies, each of which contains billions of stars, and most stars have planets. Although we can apparently date its age at a little less than 15 billion years, and we can calculate its development and evolution to within a microsecond of the beginning of the so-called Big Bang, still there is no explanation of its origin or its creator which is any better than Aristotle's "first mover."

For better or worse, our ability to conceptualize has been enormously expanded, but an evitable consequence has been that the doubts about the eternal questions have also expanded commensurately.

My personal conclusions from all this are that (i) there is inherent in the mind of mankind, (and so in me), the concept of a being greater than mankind, a first cause who created the world, and a yearning for an afterlife, (ii) neither I nor my scientific age are ever going to be able define the creator of all the billions of galaxies, or to resolve the questions and contradictions inherent in any attempt to do so.

So what to do now? My thought is that there is another concept hard-wired into mankind, the idea we call the Golden Rule. Even though it may usually be honored more in the breach than in the practice, it too runs through all religions and cultures in one form or another. Its practice is universally admired.

I think the familiar words of Paul to the Corinthians [1,13] still best sum up for us the premise behind the Golden Rule:

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

To me, the import of that message is that following the Golden Rule is more likely than anything else to bring the peace that passeth all understanding that we all seek. This is because the Rule is there, somewhere, hard-wired into each of us. It works if you can give it the chance. And it changes your perspectives. And it makes you happy. And it doesn't raise unresolvable questions.

As to the specifics of faith, I think in the end we must each find it for ourselves. Viewpoints can and inevitably will vary, but to me, it doesn't matter. (Pastor Diane gave a neat illustration of such an attitude in last week's sermon, with the remark that the first chapter of Matthew about the birth of Jesus can inspire us whether or not you regard it as recounting either a miracle or a parable.)

In short, our existential doubts will likely crop up from time to time, but I think we can just ignore them if we wish, they will never be resolved anyway, and in the end they just don't matter. I

believe that trying to follow the Golden Rule can be what leads one to deeper faith, not the other way around. In my case, it was certainly that way.