

We Make the Road by Walking: The Great Conversation

Micah 6:1-8

One of the more embarrassing chapters in the story of my spiritual life happened when I was a senior in high school. I had been part of a group called Young Life since ninth grade. Young Life is a non-denominational youth group. It offers high school students a version of Christianity that really works for kids of that age. It's fun, it's cool, and it's very concrete and clear about what it takes to be in a relationship with God. So early on in my high school life, I did what they told me God wanted me to do: I prayed one night at a weekend retreat for Jesus to come into my heart—the classic “sinner’s prayer”. And it took. I don’t talk like that any more, but that moment, that experience, changed the course of my life. It planted a seed in me that I’m very grateful for.

But here’s the embarrassing part. The year I was in twelfth grade and my sisters a few years younger, our family’s dishwasher broke. My mom decided that a broken dishwasher presented a great opportunity for her girls to learn to wash dishes the old-fashioned way. So for almost a year, my sisters and I shared dish duty every night after dinner. One night, my middle sister Patti, who was about thirteen at the time, was drying while I was washing. There we were, together at the kitchen sink, which seemed to me the perfect opportunity to convince her that she needed the same kind of conversion that I’d had. I don’t remember exactly what I said, or whether I actually put her in a headlock, but I wouldn’t let her leave the sink until she prayed the prayer I led her in, word for word. This is my sister who has never felt the need to go to church since then. No wonder.

Several years later, when I was in my twenties, everything that had seemed so clear to me about faith when I was in high school stopped making sense. None of the answers I had learned responded to the questions I was asking. And so I left the church. One day I walked out, and I literally didn’t go back for almost ten years. When I was finally ready to re-make a connection with God—find the faith that I think was asleep in me all those years—it looked very different than what I had experienced before. And I’d like to think I would never try to strong-arm anyone into my version of Christianity again.

My faith continues to change. Now when I write down what I believe, I date it, knowing that I will see and understand God differently as the circumstances of my life change and my faith evolves. I think the same thing happens in every long relationship of our lives. Think about your children, or your parents, or spouse. If you described who that other person is to you, the words you used at the beginning of your relationship are likely to be quite different than they are now.

And I imagine you would use different words to describe God than you would have when you were younger. I hope you would. If we are satisfied with the explanations we heard in Sunday school, that suggests to me that the church has not done its job, or that we have not engaged our faith deeply enough to ask hard questions of it.

This evolution—in what we believe, in what helps us makes sense out of our lives—is a life-long conversation we’re in with God and with ourselves. It’s also part of a conversation that has been going on for centuries—not only in us individually, but in us as a tradition, a people searching for and finding God in all the circumstances of our lives, and of history.

This continuing conversation *is* the story of our tradition. Some important pieces of it are captured in the Bible. Bible stories tell us of a people’s evolution. When they were nomads, wandering through the wilderness, the people saw God as a pillar of cloud and fire that cooled them in the hot daytime and lit the way for them at night. When they were at war, God was the commander of their armies. When danger was close, God was their hiding place in the rocks. At other moments, depending on what they needed, God was their king, or their shepherd, or the judge who would convict their oppressors. When they felt abandoned, they imagined God as a loving mother who never forgot them. When Jesus came, he defied the Roman Empire. He said that God saw things differently from the way Caesar did: in God’s eyes, he said, the poor have a claim to things that money can never buy, and all those lines that separate *us* from *them* are erasable.

The conversation didn’t end when the Bible was published. To the Crusaders, God was the true king who demanded that the whole world be won for Christianity. In the Middle Ages, when human life seemed cruel, brutish and short, God promised that all the suffering of this lifetime would be made right in the rewards of a next life. To the Africans who were slaves in America, Jesus was the one who suffered with them, and gave them hope for a better future. To base communities in Latin America and India and South Africa, and to civil rights workers in this country, God promised to stand side-by-side with the poor and the oppressed until non-violence broke the systems of oppression that had seemed *un*-breakable.

Some of these stories embarrass us. All of them *form* us. They make us who we are today and they shape the conversation we are in now.

From time to time throughout this history, people have imagined that this conversation might be nearing its end. Today we live in what has been called the Secular Age; many people think that the church has exhausted its usefulness. We have scientific answers to many of the questions that used to be answerable only by faith. We no longer believe that there is only one right way to find God, or hope, or peace. It’s not always clear that religious people live more fulfilling lives, or bring more good to the world than anyone else. Our children seem not to need what was essential to our parents, and maybe to us. It’s as if the thread of the conversation is fraying.

We are not the first ones this worry has occurred to. It’s a refrain, not a verse. The voice that questions the future has always been part of the conversation. In the 1940’s—almost *eighty* years ago—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Christian theologian and Nazi resistor, wrote,

What is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today? The age when we could tell people that with words...is past, as is the age of inwardness and conscience, and that means the age of religion altogether. We are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply can’t be religious any more.ⁱ

Bonhoeffer was wrong, of course; in some places at least, religion, and even the Church, thrived through the rest of the twentieth century. The invitation to follow the way of Jesus continues to save people's lives; it has saved mine, and Lenora's, and maybe yours also.

And so, the conversation continues. The text changes; to every point there is also a counterpoint. Sometimes the thread gets thin; we can be distracted by all kinds of issues and arguments that are not so important. What kind of worship pleases us, and God? Which group's theology is more true? Will there be enough money for the church to survive?

But there is a through-line to this conversation, a melody that comes to the surface in every moment of silence. When nothing else makes sense, when God seems not to be answering any other questions, when things around you are changing so fast that you feel like you have lost your place altogether, there is one question whose answer has always remained the same:

And now, how shall we live?

The answer lies in the words of the prophet Micah, but they might have been spoken in any age, in any language, in response to every question:

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

If you're trying to figure out what God wants from you, Micah says, I'll tell you. It's not so much about understanding or knowing or believing the right things. It doesn't much matter whether the institution of the church is strong or weak. It's about what you do, how you live. Notice that all of the verbs in Micah's instruction are action words. *Do* justice. *Love* kindness. *Walk* humbly with God.

From time to time, others have added important words that help us fill out what Micah meant. Jesus said, "Here's how you *do* and *love* and *walk*. You feed everyone who's hungry. You give everything you can. You welcome anyone who's not inside yet. You visit all the places where nobody else wants to go. You take care of other people with as much attention as you take care of yourself."

And one of our modern day prophets, Ann Lamott, added to those words in a commencement speech she gave at UC Berkeley a few years ago. She said,

"So how do we feed and nourish our spirit, and the spirit of others? ... You don't have to go overseas. There are people right there who are poor in spirit; worried, depressed, dancing as fast as they can, whose kids are sick, or whose retirement savings are gone. There is great loneliness among us, life-threatening loneliness. People have given up on peace, on equality...

You do what you can, what good people have always done: You bring thirsty people water; you share your food; you try to help the homeless find shelter, you stand up for the underdog....[You remember that] you are

loved; you are capable of lives of great joy and meaning. It's what you are made of. And it's what you're made for. So take care of yourselves; take care of each other."

It is enough...today...always.

ⁱ Quoted in James Carroll, *Christ Actually*, Viking 2014, p. 4