

Faith vs. Flap

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Preaching on:

Psalm 62:5–12

1 Corinthians 9:24–27

Our reading from the Psalms this morning asks us to wait in silence for God—to rely totally on God and God’s action. Salvation comes from God—not from this world, not from my own effort, not from anything else other than God. So, I must faithfully wait.

In our reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul suggests that we run like we were in a race—to win it. We should train (as hard as athletes do) for the gold medal of salvation. And we shouldn’t just take one of those popular boxing classes where you punch the bag but nobody ever actually takes a swing at you. We need to get into the ring and really compete so that we can become masters of ourselves. Paul proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ to others, but fears that if he doesn’t live the gospel out in sweat and blood, in effort, and in self-mastery that the gift he offers others may be denied to him.

So, which is it? Should I take the advice of the psalmist and rely totally on God and God's grace? Or should I follow Paul and make every human effort possible to win salvation?

Growing up in church as a kid, I mostly got the message that the most important thing was to have faith—faith in God, faith in Jesus, to believe. And I did believe. But by the time I was in high school I was beginning to see the world more clearly—how broken and violent and corrupt and unjust it was, all the suffering of God's people around the world—much of it preventable, much of it caused by us—other people.

Suddenly it felt like my faith alone wasn't enough. If I really believed in a God who was bigger than me and was best described as love and righteousness, was lip service to the Kingdom of Heaven really enough? It felt hypocritical to say that I believed in the Bible but that I believed in the Bible so much—in faith alone—that I was somehow exempted from living out the Bible's full vision for God's people. It was like saying, "I believe totally in vegetarianism" while eating a hotdog and not seeing a problem there. At some point you've got to put your money where your mouth is, right? Like Paul says, you've got to go all in. It felt to me like the church knows how to talk the talk, but do they really know how to walk the walk?

By the time I was in seminary, I knew that faith and grace and waiting in silence weren't going to be enough for me. I had no plans to ever be the kind of minister who is standing in front of you right now—serving a traditional church. I wanted to actually do something! I wanted to put faith into action! I wanted to be the change! I wasn't interested in charity or token acts of compassion—"tossing a coin to a beggar" as Martin Luther King, Jr. once famously put it. Like King, I wanted to transform the social and economic systems that reduced people to begging in the first place. I was interested in revolutionary justice—liberation theologies, ending poverty, shoring up workers' rights, organizing, supporting the voices and the movements of marginalized people. And I poured myself into very left, very progressive Christian and political spaces and organizations for years.

I was right where I wanted to be, with extremely dedicated people, sacrificing every day, fighting the good fight, and making a difference. And in those very same progressive spaces, I found a lot of dysfunction, a lot of self-inflicted suffering and pain, and a lot of infighting caused not infrequently by injustice and unfairness in the very power dynamics of the movements that were fighting for justice and fairness.

But most devastating of all to me was the endemic burnout and the holistic unhealthiness of all that endless sacrifice and nonstop effort to make the world a better place. And even in the explicitly Christian spaces it felt like the working belief was that it was all up to us. The project of making the world a better place rested entirely on our shoulders alone. Waiting for God? Listening for God? Relying on God? To us that seemed, at best, naive and at worst it was just a way for people to assuage their guilt and let themselves off the hook of their responsibility to love their neighbors as

themselves.

We believed that somehow faith in God's grace, in God's plan, God's action had gotten in the way of the true path of human responsibility and effort. The ironic consequence of all this was that effort, and good works, and making a difference (which had come to define my faith in God) had now left me so spiritually depleted that they had almost undone my faith in anything at all. I began to reflect and to realize that I couldn't—we can't—do it all by ourselves. We need God to be fundamentally involved.

Once upon a time, there was an orphaned sparrow who fell out of the nest and was all alone in the world. When it came time for him to learn how to fly, he decided he should seek flying lessons from Eagle who was admired by all the birds for his abilities. Sparrow climbed up to Eagle's eerie and asked him what he should do to learn to fly. "If you want to fly," Eagle said, "you must trust the Air and its currents. Stretch out your wings and let the wind carry you along."

The little sparrow followed Eagle's advice to the letter. For days he simply stood on the ground, stretching out his wings and trusting. Every once in a while, he felt something—a little rustle or breeze—that made him feel sure that he was on the right track. But after days of waiting with his wings out, he didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

One day Hummingbird darted past and saw the little sparrow standing on the ground with his wings out and his eyes closed. "What are you doing?" he asked. "I'm learning to fly!" chirped Sparrow. "What simpleton taught you that that's the way to fly?" shouted Hummingbird. "Eagle told me I needed to trust the Air, and it's currents will carry me wherever I need to go." "Oh, that old superstition!" said Hummingbird with contempt. "Listen, kid, if you want to learn to fly, you've got to flap your wings like me."

The little sparrow started to flap his wings and got immediate results. He flapped his wings so fast he sounded like a little helicopter—Whir! Whir! Whir! And to his delight, by the end of the day he was off the ground (Whir! Whir! Whiirr!), and the next day he was in the treetops (Whir! Whir! Whiirrr!), and by the next day the sky was the limit (Whiirr! Whiirrr! Whiirrrrr!). But by the fourth day he was so exhausted he couldn't even lift his wings up from his sides and hold them out, let alone fly anywhere.

The little sparrow lay on the ground panting, his dream of flying through the heavens seeming more distant than ever before. That evening, as the sky turned a soft shade of orange and the air cooled, the sparrow felt the gentle caress of a breeze once more. Lying there, exhausted, he didn't worry about the fact that he had proven with his flapping that Air was just a superstition—a crutch for birds who didn't want to fly; he simply let the breeze envelop him, feeling its subtle power, feeling the way it moved through his feathers, feeling like his whole body was designed to be touched by it.

In that moment, as he gave in to the quiet presence of the Air around him, he felt a renewed strength and determination within him. He flapped his wings—once, twice, three times—not a blur of frantic

energy, just enough to let the Air know he was there, that he was ready. And then he stretched out his wings and he soared. Rising into the sky he thought he heard the wind whispering to him with every gentle, intentional flap of his wings, "Yes! Yes, little sparrow! Let's do it together!"

In the end, the sparrow's journey mirrors our own spiritual journey. Faith and works are not exclusive; they're complementary. Faith inspires action, and action stirs up and expresses our faith. We need the wisdom to know when to act and when to be still, when to speak and when to listen. Our faith is not measured by one or the other but in the delicate balance between the two. Too much flapping and we will fall flat. Too much standing around and waiting for Air to do all the work, and we'll never leave the ground.

This is what I've learned in my journey. Just like there's no such thing as flying without air, there's no such thing as action, or transformation, or revolution, or dreams, or vision, or any kind of change for the better at all without God's grace. God's action, I think, is best described like the activity of air: Every once in a while, it gives a mighty blow, but most of the time it's simply the invisible medium that carries us along, that empowers us to express our faith in the first place. Air is there because it expects us to fly. But if we lose sight of the fact that we were designed to fly through air, we'll create for ourselves a spiritual vacuum that will leave us stranded.

Like the psalmist we must learn to rely totally on God. Like Paul we must endeavor to make every effort. And like the sparrow, we must learn to do both at the same time. In the balance, we find the true freedom to make a difference, to accomplish what seems beyond our reach, held aloft by the love and the power of something much greater than ourselves.