

Good Morning!

As part of our observance of the great events of the Reformation now 500 years ago, over the next few weeks our Monday Chapel homilies will explore questions of religious truth, falsehood, certainty, faith, and doubt.

There are many ways that I could tell a story about how I have found certainty with room for exploration—the best kind of certainty in my view. I could tell a story about how I became a Christian because of a healing experience at age 19. Or—perhaps more boringly—I could talk about how I have become intellectually convinced about truth of Christian beliefs. But today instead I want to talk about a slow steady collection of lifetime experiences that have left me deeply convinced about the rightness of Christian faith and practice. I believe that Christianity describes the way the world really WORKS and how we can best live in it. Many of my life experiences have touched upon the truth value of the three Christian theological virtues—faith, hope, and love. I wish to speak about those today.

The truth value of faith and hope is powerful, but often hidden. We sometimes see it most clearly in the tragedy of people who do NOT have faith or hope and we see what they have lost. Faith requires a basic openness to changing our perspective and actions, even if these changes run counter to what seems “obvious” given our previous assumptions about life. In our modern society, we often see its lack most clearly in people who are closed-minded and refuse to consider new possibilities. Hope is in a sense the next step; it requires a willingness to **live our lives** looking forward to great possibilities which come to us as unexpected gifts. We see the cost of its loss in people who have not only given up a sense of possibility but actively reject it. In my life, as much as I can, I choose to accept the gifts of open-mindedness and a willingness to live a life of unexpected possibility. The cost of rejecting these is simply too great. I hope that each of you will accept the gifts of faith and hope as well.

Love is of course the most important of the theological virtues; it is also perhaps easier to see the truth value of the uniquely Christian meaning of love as this plays out in the events of our lives. Now, love is a complicated thing. In the Classical period, Plato paints a picture of love as a kind of disease that occurs when a person develops a desire for another person, perhaps because of an attraction to their beauty¹. We can relate to this experience, but we also know that the Christian idea of love—agape love—is quite different. For the Christian, true love is more about a commitment to another person and a willingness to sacrifice for them rather than what we desire they will give to us.

I have seen the power of this kind of love in my own life. As a positive example, I offer the story of my best friend of over 30 years who was diagnosed with a brain tumor about a year ago and died at the end of July. If there is a good way to die, most people would say that a brain tumor is not one of them. But their's is a Christian family and I learned about love watching them cope with the process in a sacrificial way, thinking of others before themselves. My friend made a number of decisions about his treatment that obviously shortened his lifespan and disrupted his life; he did this because he felt choosing a more difficult path would be best for his family. From the other side, his wife and children did not focus on what they suffered or needed in the situation, but simply concentrated on supporting him and enjoying the last few months together. Watching this sort of thing revives one's faith in Christianity.

On the other hand, negative examples of what occurs when we abandon Christian love are unfortunately easy to spot nowadays. One striking image that I saw on the internet some time ago was a sign being held by a group of protestors saying “Love, not Hate,” while some of

¹ *Phaedrus*, especially 231C–237D; cf. passages in the *Symposium*

them were in the process of beating up people on the other side of the issue. Apparently they were unaware of the incongruity of this. It brings to mind an entirely different kind of response that has been modeled for us by great Christian women and men of the past. For instance, here is a story told about Abba Macarius, one of the great Desert Fathers who helped define Christian practical ideals:

One day Abba Macarius went up from Scetis to the mountain of Nitria. As he approached the place he told his disciple to go on ahead. As the disciple travelled, he met a priest of the pagans. The brother shouted after him saying, "You devil, where are you off to?" The priest turned back and beat him and left him half dead. Then picking up his stick, he fled. When he had gone a little further, Abba Macarius met him running and said, "Greetings, you weary man!" Quite astonished, the other came up to him and said, "What good do you see in me, that you greet me in this way? The old man said to him, "I have seen you wearing yourself out without knowing that you are wearing yourself out in vain." The other said to him, "I have been touched by your greeting and I realize that you are on God's side. But another wicked monk who met me insulted me and I have given him blows enough for him to die of them." Abba Macarius realized that he was referring to his disciple. Then the priest fell at his feet and said, "I will not let you go till you have made me a monk." When they came to the place where the brother was, they put him onto their shoulders and carried him to the church in the mountain. So Abba Macarius said, "One evil word makes even the good evil, while one good word makes even the evil good."²

What would our church, our community, our world be like if we followed the example of Abba Macarius today?

In my life, I have seen the living proof of faith, hope, and love, as well as what happens when we follow a different path. These gifts are there for the asking. What would the possibilities in our world be if we reached out to others with faith, hope and love? May God grant us the courage to trust and willingness to accept a vision of a way of life filled with these things.

Amen

² *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Alphabetical Collection), Macarius 39.