

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Pentecost 17 Luke 17:5-10

Come Holy spirit and enkindle, in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your love.

amen.

Good morning Trinity Church. So in February of 1963 a 76 year old Paul Tillich delivered the Earl lectures at graduate theological union in Berkeley, California, Tillich. Among the centuries most important Christian theologians fled from Hitler's Germany to teach at union seminary in New York at Harvard and at the university of Chicago. And in that moment he would have recognized the well-intended pressures of his peers and his Devotees, that he would deliver a kind of theological capstone and Academy ready forward facing summary of his life's work. Instead, as he prepared for the lectures, he recalls the confessional focus that came to him. Paul, the voice of conscience, he says, spoke to him saying, in this situation, you must tell not of what you already know or believe you know for of course, you know nothing you must speak instead of what is nearest your heart. Tillich describes that when I thought about it, I decided that what worries me most and what worries me most deeply in these last years is the question, is the Christian message, especially Christian preaching, still relevant to the people of our time and if not,

what is the cause of its irrelevance? Now, while Tillich spoke amid the postwar surge and church membership and church attendance, he suspected that most of Christianity's successes in those days were only superficial. Portending the decades of decline leading to our moment, He voiced concern that typical Christian preaching doesn't reach many people even among those who regularly attend church. Indeed Tillich's saw through our suburban captivity. Lodging the same complaints of bourgeois that this pulpit has recalled of Sartre, that our forums have recalled of Drucker for the relevance of the Christian message and it's meaningful purchase in our culture is not proved by habitual attendance. Tillich attributed congregational growth largely to largely to sociological reasons, to that of status, to a desire to belong to an ingrained feeling of religious duty and he proposed that the Christian messages continuing relevance depended upon its engagement with humanity's, existential questions. Those which concern the whole of human existence, not only knowing in its scientific sense, but also feeling and willing our church asking together as a Christian body, what is the meaning of my being and of that larger being of which I am part? Where do I get the courage to live?

How can I save my personal being amid the mechanized ways of life? How can I overcome the conflicts that torture me inwardly? Where can I transform and find an ultimate concern that will overcome my emptiness? For Tillich, a Christian community, no matter its average Sunday attendance, no matter the quality of its ministries, no matter the impacts of its outreach, a Christian community is irrelevant if it does not grapple seriously and centrally with these core questions of the human condition. Toward those existential concerns and for our reading of today's gospel, Tillich distinguishes between belief and faith. Belief and faith. In the Earl Lectures, Tillich submits beliefs are opinions held to be true. And as he notes, we need beliefs for the practical affairs of everyday life for rather than actions themselves. Beliefs inform our actions that we believe that traffic will be better. The earlier we leave for work and so we leave early. However, as we who regularly brave Boston traffic will know, those beliefs may or may not prove to be true. And depending upon any number of contingencies, our belief may prove in fact, entirely false. In any case, beliefs are never a matter of life and death, never a matter of ultimate concern.

Faith, on the other hand, is the state of being grasped by something that has ultimate meaning. And acting and thinking on the basis of that being grasped. Here, the action, the dynamism with which Tillich points to faith,

faith as the state of being grasped by the ultimate, not the grasp, the noun, but the verb, the being grasped, and then acting and thinking on that active experience. Until its conception therefore, one does not and cannot have Faith, for faith is not a possession. Instead through an encounter with the divine encounters with grace encounters, with love, encounters with mercy, encounters with beauty, encounters with mystery, one engages in the faith-ing. If that turn of phrase is helpful and then responds and purposeful dwelling in and deepening of that encounter.

Faith propels us vertically toward what Tillich would describe as the unconditional while mere beliefs move us horizontally forward perhaps, but only forward without meaning or an ultimate destination. Turning now toward this morning's appointment from Luke and the apostles appeal to Jesus. They ask for the increase of their faith. In the Greek there's only one word for faith. There isn't a distinction between belief and faith, but until Tillich's terms they're asking here for belief and not belief only, but for more beliefs, for more opinions and more clevernesses that will move them forward in the world with greater renown and greater influence. And so seeking to draft Jesus' advantages along these, this horizontal line of history. They asked the Lord for the secrets of his success. Now importantly, whether they seek these advantages for themselves or for the world does not matter. For in either case their concerns are exclusively worldly bound to the finite, like scientists with their methods like engineers with their equations, rather than seeking God or even better seeking the state of being with God, they seek instead to objectify God, to have God and not God only, but more God as though God is a drive through order served in varying sizes. Yes, I'll, I'll have the uh, number five double cheeseburger meal. Please hold the tomatoes on that and can I, could I supersize it with fries and um, 18 ounces of diet, God.

No, though the disciples do not entirely realize the absurdity of their requests. Jesus does and so responds with absurdity. If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this Mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea and it would obey you. No, be clear. Jesus' response does not suggest that they will become telekinetic Jedi should they somehow acquire the sufficient content and quantity of belief. Rather, Jesus directs the apostles to faith to an entirely different question. To an entirely different outcome to an entirely different idea. One loosed from objectified reality from transaction and Jesus invites them to transformation and more than transformation only to transforming.

Do you remember the the red plastic View-Master toy? You know, those, those binocular shaped mechanical devices that accepted round reels with static images of film that were pressed along their perimeter. And so inserting one of these reels into the View-Master, the stereoscope would present these cells and what appeared to be three dimensions and like a Kodak carousel slide projector built for one, pressing a button would click us through the images in a sequence that would recount a Mork and Mindy episode or a trip through an exotic locale. In the late 1970s Fisher price improved on the View-Master idea and came up with the movie viewer, a movie camera shaped device with a crank on its side. This toy accepted plastic cartridges and inside the plastic cartridge was a small wound wheel of film. And so pressing the viewer to one's eye and holding the toy to the light and turning the crank. A full motion scene from the bionic woman would magically appear.

And this distinction between belief and faith, those view master reels, collections of beliefs, but this magic, this experience of of motion and action, faith. In this morning's gospel exchange the apostles have brought their view masters to Jesus and they appealed to the Lord for more reels, more reels of belief. Teacher, We've seen 20,000 leagues under the Galilean Sea and we've watched Jesus Heals the Paralytic like 50 times. Can you, can you give us more reels and increase our reels, Jesus.

And for us who follow in the apostolic tradition, there is a tension between following the one who has followed and following the followers. Oftentimes, especially in our own day and our own moment as was true for Tillich is true for us. We come to church too with our view masters looking for beliefs to which we might make our ascent. Rather than a faith into which we might be invited to participate. As Tillich continues, one of the worst things, making the Christian message irrelevant is the identification of faith with belief in doctrines especially bad as the demand to believe what is unbelievable. We as the church need to claim clearly that faith is being grasped by a

power that concerns us and concerns us ultimately, and belief is always preliminary. Rather than making our ascent, let us join in the grasping, the encountering, the being with God,

Jesus, the carpenter, the Nazarene who lived and loved and struggled and died. Jesus reveals God's hope for the world and importantly for Tillich, the incarnation also illumines God's strategy for binding creation to salvation and the strategy is embedding the good news within history for us who would follow Christ then we should receive our cues accordingly. Taking care to seek faith in this Holy One rather than repeating the same mistakes of our apostolic forebears. When we open ourselves to this mode of active faith, when we receive and accept God's invitation to encounter with the divine. In faith we receive, we experience more than mustard seeds or Mulberry trees more than View-Master reels. More than beliefs of doctrine, we receive more than we can ask or imagine. That we would pursue this faith in the name of God, Amen.