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When Do We Say We Are No Longer the Same Faith? (Matthew 9.9-13)

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Tonight we come to the final reflection in our series, ‘You Can’t Ask That’ – at least for this round! We’ve focused over the past few weeks on fundamental questions of interpretation in relation to Christian faith; how do we understand the bible to be holy and why do we bother with Scripture anyway; how do we understand the nature of judgement, the concept of hell and the person of Jesus; and how and why do we pray? Fittingly enough, tonight’s question concerns the issue of interpretation itself. How great a range of interpretive possibility, much variation in belief can be encompassed under the broad ‘church’ of Christian confession? In particular, Melissa asked:

It sometimes feels like the faith and Christianity that I follow and subscribe to seems so far removed from that espoused by other ‘more prominent’ or ‘louder’ arms of the Christian church as to be almost a completely different religion. We have the bible (the physical book, not its interpretation) and Jesus in common, but that is about it. At what point do we stop saying we are the same faith? I’m not even sure who it is I mean by ‘we’ to be honest. But whilst the life and death of Jesus are central, all of the teachings that flow from this, how we are to live our lives, the purpose and ‘mission’, feel so different that are we actually the same faith?

Part of what prompts Melissa’s question, she went on to write, is her sense that ‘often I have to offer an explainer when I tell someone I go to church, or that I ground my life in my faith. “It’s not what you think”, often seems to come out of my mouth’, and I can certainly relate to this experience! Melissa wondered if her primary concern is what people think of her, if it’s ‘about me having an ego’, but I think there’s more to it than that. It’s about having some assurance that your own appropriation of the tradition is faithful, consistent with the understanding of a wider body of believers; it’s also about the gift we want to share with others – since

some expressions of Christianity seem to render faith irrelevant to many who might otherwise find it a life-giving way.

The basic conundrum, as I experience it, is that often the Christian 'voice' that's heard in public espouses views that are not mine and that in fact seem inimical to the gospel. Groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby, the evangelical right in the United States, some conservative Catholics and the Anglican diocese of Sydney (among others) tend to obsess about sexual morality and valorise the nuclear family, condemning those who fail to conform to its norms. This means excluding the LGBTQI+ community and those who are divorced, as well as pressuring young singles to be married off as quickly as possible. These expressions of Christianity can be intolerant of other faith traditions and literalistic in interpreting their own. In public discourse, they often come across as puritanical and self-righteous; in the case of evangelicals for Trump, they're also dangerously anti-science and tending to fascism. And yet, somehow, *these* are the forms of Christianity that have gained ascendancy in many denominations and captured the public imagination as definitive of our tradition. So does there come a point at which have to stop saying we are the same faith?

Well, as will be obvious, we're in dangerous waters here. Religious history is peppered with conflict between rival groups, each proclaiming themselves to be the 'true believers' over against those who are declared infidels, apostates or heretics. Often such conflicts have spawned terrible violence, especially when they've been linked to territorial or political agendas. Think of the wars of religion in early modern Europe, conflict between Sunni and Shia traditions in Islam, Protestant and Catholic in northern Ireland. Even when it hasn't been implicated in war as such, investment in 'right' belief has led to lasting schisms within communities, as well as intolerance of difference and the exclusion of those deemed beyond the pale. The conversation about who is really 'faithful' and who isn't, is profoundly risky.

And yet, if we can't distinguish between true and false (or at least between truer and less true) interpretations of a tradition, then that suggests there's no real

content to what we proclaim, no way to distinguish between faithful and unfaithful practice. And I think this matters. It mattered for a group of Reformed and Lutheran Christians in 1930s Germany to be able to oppose any interpretation of Christianity based on racial theories – an interpretation that had been adopted by the Nazi influenced ‘German Christians’.¹ It mattered for Jesus, opposing an interpretation of his own Jewish tradition that meant excluding those deemed impure from fellowship with God and belonging in community. And it matters for us, in debates over such things as marriage equality and the campaign by some churches to acquire a religiously justified right to discriminate. But how do we measure the relative validity of different interpretations and expressions of a tradition? Who gets to say what the criteria are?

In the Jewish and Christian context, it’s at this point that appeal is often made to the biblical text. Take the passage we just heard. The Pharisees criticise Jesus for breaking what they take to be God’s Law plainly set out in Scripture, concerning holiness of life and separation from the ungodly. Perhaps Psalm 26 (v.4-5) lurks in the background: ‘I do not sit with false men, nor do I consort with dissemblers; I hate the company of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked’. In response, Jesus deploys another Scriptural citation – this one from the prophet Hosea, attributing to God the words, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings’ (Hosea 6.6). At first glance, this exchange looks like one of those arguments between conservatives and progressives, that tend to go nowhere. It put me in mind of some of the debates over the ordination of women, where those opposed quoted the first letter of Timothy ‘I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent’ (1 Timothy 2.12) while those in favour quoted Paul’s letter to the Galatians, ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3.28).

¹ Expressed in the Barmen Declaration of 1934.

But I want to suggest that in Jesus' argument with the Pharisees, something more is going on. He's not just hurling back a proof text that supports the view he already holds, using the words of Scripture to justify his own practice. It's true he offers an 'argument' for acting the way he does – 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick'. But then he goes on. It's as if he's picked up something in the Pharisees' whole way of being in this exchange which indicates they've failed to understand the heart of God. He says: '*Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice"*'. There's a similar exchange in Chapter 12 of Matthew's gospel, where again Jesus comes under fire for allowing his disciples to do what the Pharisees say 'is not lawful to do on the sabbath' – namely, plucking grain and eating it as they pass through the fields. Again, Jesus offers some justifying Scriptural precedents – David and his companions eating the bread of the Presence when they were hungry. But then once more he says: '*if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice"*, you would not have condemned the guiltless' (12.7).

So what is it that Jesus thinks these Pharisees do not know? I wonder if it's that they haven't learnt the difference between claiming to speak *for* God and being transformed *by* God. Anyone can learn the rules; anyone can become ritually adept and a zealous enforcer of the law. But not everyone is willing to undergo God's process of transformation, because this process always involves a kind of cracking of self-protection, a breaking of the heart. Why is this? It's not because God is a masochist. It's just that only as we realise we can't make *ourselves* 'good' or 'holy' can we begin to receive what God wants to give, and so grow in God's way. Only in the place of radical poverty and humility, which we enter usually by way of failure, betrayal, loss and disillusionment, do we become truly undefended and open to God, and so to others. Think of how it was for the disciples in the wake of Jesus' crucifixion, or for Saul knocked off his horse on the way to Damascus and suddenly realising he's got everything wrong. In the cracking of the heart, 'the believer's self-protection and isolation are broken', Rowan Williams writes, and it's as the heart is

broken that there is 'space for others, for compassion'.² This is why the prophets of Israel proclaim again and again that true worship requires a contrite and humbled heart and is intrinsically connected to justice. Says the psalmist: 'if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise' (Psalm 51.16-17).

Jesus is suggesting that this is what the Pharisees have not learnt. They can quote their Scripture, they can keep the rules, but their hearts have not been broken, turned from hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. And what makes this obvious is that they can look at Jesus eating with a bunch of tax collectors and outcasts and see only a broken rule. They perceive those before them without mercy – without any sense of solidarity, of what it might be like to spend your whole life as an outsider, humiliated and judged. Which means they also cannot recognise who Jesus is, the very presence among them of the grace and balm, the mercy of God.

I think it would be a mistake to read this dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees as if it were a contest between progressive or conservative values, liberal or evangelical views. This story operates at a different level. It's about the difference between being hard-hearted and broken-hearted, between being self-righteous and poor in spirit. Jesus is not simply endorsing one set of values against others. He's pointing up the difference between those who claim to speak *for* God and those who truly *know* God – where the knowledge of God is always made manifest in the impulse to show mercy, in solidarity and lowliness of heart.

Melissa says: 'the faith and Christianity that I follow and subscribe to seems so far removed from that espoused by other 'more prominent' or 'louder' arms of the Christian church as to be almost a completely different religion'. Are we following a different faith? But in the light of this story, I wonder if the issue isn't so much about a *different* faith, as of *maturing* in faith. It's not just the Pharisees who need to learn what it means to proclaim a God who desires mercy and not sacrifice. There are

² Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to John of the Cross*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.21.

times when any of us can be 'hard of heart', blind to the impact of our own shadow and the righteousness we defend at others' expense. In my experience, in my own heart I know, that those who identify at the progressive or liberal end of the spectrum can be just as intolerant and self-righteous, as those who identify as conservatives. All of us are called to grow in self-dispossessing faith, to mature (as St Paul puts it) to the full stature of Christ.

The frustrating thing, of course, is that immature religion often seems to speak louder and get more attention than a faith that is humbler, gentler, aware of its own unfinishedness. Rowan Williams once said the task of theology was to make it harder, not easier, to speak of God and the same could be said of contemplative prayer; but in a context where the glib, noisy and self-assured get all the air time, this doesn't seem such a great design feature. Even so, I wonder ... Melissa asked: 'Does it matter if the broader community does not understand the range and breadth of the faith and that there are other ways of doing Christianity?' But then she shared this: 'It's funny, but my sister who is somewhere on the strongly agnostic-atheist spectrum says that since hearing from me about Benedictus and my faith, she often finds herself defending Christianity to others in debates!'

It sounds to me like something of the knowledge of God is being communicated to her through the transformation of a life, of *your* life – Melissa... and by what other means could God be made known than one broken open heart at a time?