

From the Pastor's Desk

How Do You Explain An Oak Tree?

I have been thinking a lot about faith lately. Is faith simply “thinking something to be true”? If so, then it’s all about the mind, which seems rather shallow to me. For example, one can recite the Nicene or Apostle’s Creed and say: “I believe these statements to be true”, which is to say, “I think them to be true”. The problem is that one can remain unmoved by these thoughts and faith gets no further than the gray matter between our ears. Catholics think this statement to be true; Presbyterians think another statement to be true; and Lutherans think other statements to be true. We might even fight about these mental concepts and argue about who has the correct ones. Can mental concepts contain the truth about God?

Try to explain to a child what an oak tree is. You can take the child into the forest and point to an oak tree and say, “This is an oak tree”. Yet, does “oak tree” explain what an oak tree is? Are not the words “oak” and “tree” simply human words? The oak tree is a living entity that sprouted from an acorn in a way humans don’t understand. It grows and reaches to the heavens using a process called photosynthesis where sunlight is captured by the leaves and somehow mysteriously turns into the life force of the tree. Do the words “oak tree” capture this mystery? The danger in telling a child that this is an oak tree is that the child may no longer see the miracle of life he or she is standing in front of. All the child may see in the future is the label “oak tree” and dismiss it. A better way would be to say to the child: “We have chosen to call this beautiful living entity an oak tree but this term fails to contain its magnificence.”

In the same way, the words God, Jesus or Holy Spirit are merely labels that do not contain the essence of our mysterious God and may even put limits on God. The Jewish people would not even say the name “God”. Why? Because to name God was to limit God. God cannot be contained in any name, because it always reduces God into a human concept. Remember in Exodus when Moses asked God what God’s name was? God’s response was *“I AM WHO AM”. This is what you are to say to the Israelites, ‘I AM’ sent me to you.*” (Exodus 3:14) “I AM” is difficult, if not impossible, to reduce to a human concept. The author of the Gospel of John ascribes “I AM” to Jesus (John 8:58), which is to say that Jesus is the revelation of “I AM”.

Martin Luther rebelled against a church that had reduced God into a human concept which was controlled and managed by church officials. This was most clearly symbolized in the selling of indulgences where entrance into heaven was put under human control. The ELCA continues Luther’s tradition and knows words and symbols can never really explain or contain the mystery of God. Rather than try to contain God, our words and symbols point us toward living in the grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ.

When done well, Sunday liturgy is a source of this grace. I’m sure you’ve had experiences of God’s presence during Sunday services at the communion rail, singing a hymn, joining hands with your neighbor during the Lord’s Prayer, or perhaps during the sermon. While singing “The Lord of the Dance” on Palm Sunday, I found myself getting choked up. Somehow that song was a portal (opening) through which the grace of God touched me. Properly understood and celebrated, the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are portals to the grace of God.

Rather than trying to stuff God into words or concepts, we seek a love relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Anything else will never satisfy. As Augustine said, “You have formed us for yourself Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee”.