

As many of you know, I turned fifty over the summer, and as a birthday present to myself, I booked rooms at a couple of bed-and-breakfasts in Stillwater last weekend and invited my best friends to celebrate with me. The weather was beautiful. The leaves were beginning to flame, but the gardens around Victorian mansions were still lush, and koi swam placidly in a stone pool in the morning sun. My sister and my friends and I picked apples and drank wine, shopped for books, listened to jazz played live. We stuffed ourselves with four-course breakfasts, towering ice cream cones, and well-seasoned barbecue. One memorable night, we sat on the floor of my bedroom, next to a large box of Sugar Babies, Fun Dip, Root Beer Barrels, candy cigarettes, and other sweets that were in currency in 1966, and played a game that my sister and I invented as children forty years ago. It is possible that our guffawing was a blight on the romantic get-aways of other guests.

It was a glorious weekend, and as I sat for tea on a wrap-around porch or sniffed scented lockets in a boutique, I thanked God for the bliss of it. But what was most satisfying was not the blue sky or the tents filled with artisan wares amassed along the St. Croix River, but being with people who have known me for more than thirty or forty years. Together, the women whom I was with know everything about me. They know how judgemental I am. They know the names of the people who have broken my heart. They know how vicious I can be when I am angry, which is to say, when I am bewildered or hurt. They know that my first impulse is to be bossy and superior and that if they stick around long enough, I will become relaxed and merciful. I assume that behind my back, they shake their heads and discuss the ways in which my life would be more fulfilling if only I were able to see myself and my mistakes as clearly they can. I assume that they talk about the ways in which I have wounded them. Being happy with these women was a profound reminder to me of the virtue of faithfulness.

In our reading from scripture this morning, the people of Israel have arrived, out of slavery in Egypt, at the base of Mount Sinai where they have experienced God in thunder and lightning, and maybe even in voice. Moses has climbed the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments written by God's own finger and to learn ways in which God wishes to be honored. This takes time. It takes forty days and forty nights. But the people at the foot of the mountain become restless. What was Moses doing? Maybe his god was no longer pleased with him. People die on mountains; maybe Moses was dead. These are not unreasonable conclusions. So they ask Moses' brother Aaron, a priest, to fashion a new god.

We are the people of Israel. We are impatient. Introduce in us a moment of waiting, a sliver of fear, and our instinct is not to trust God, but to formulate a new religion, one that makes more room for our failings. And yet we measure infidelity, not by ourselves, but almost always by the actions of others. Why should Moses have been so slow? Didn't God care about the trauma of the Israelites? How could God lead them from bondage only to ask them to pass night after night at the foot of an unknown mountain in a strange land, without bearing. What kind of shilly-shallying god was this?

The comedian George Carlin used to do a bit about driving. Have you ever noticed, he asked, that anyone driving slower than you are is an idiot, and anyone driving faster than you are is a maniac? These are the judgements that we pass about the faithlessness of others. We posit ourselves as traveling the one, true speed, while all around us are scofflaws, people who don't care about what is good and right. This is the case, speaking at least for myself, even if we are consistently driving five miles over the speed limit, if we are not, in fact, faithful.

But speed is a spiritual problem. What we want, we want now. We want what we want because it addresses that sliver of fear: the niggling notion that we are not going to be okay, that our jobs are vanishing, our children are hungry, and there is hatred on every airwave; that there is not enough money, our water is dirty, and our bodies betray us. Our anxiety ebbs but returns. We want Moses to come down from the mountain, to give us greeting from God. We feel entitled to that greeting—that rainbow, that covenant—whether or not we have been faithful, whether or not we have sent our greetings—through prayer and contemplation, worship and service—to the One who blesses us.

Patience is a practice of faith. For seven years, I had a job at which I felt ill-used, a job for which it seemed the entire end result was the financial enrichment of four human beings whom I judged to be greedy, and I couldn't imagine that God's purpose for me was to abet that greed. Yes, I imagined that I knew the mind of God. And so I looked for work. I looked for work for seven years, during the recession and the tardy recovery, and the only thing more emotionally demanding than sending resumé after resumé into the starving maw of the brutal economy was doing nothing. And yet, I came to believe that doing nothing was an act of faith, that it was more productive than my desperate worship of the hunt. I stopped scrolling through job listings. I stopped rearranging my work experience to match what I thought employers were looking for. I stopped engaging in the hubris of thinking that I was better built than God to wrestle my life into a more sacred shape. I rested at the foot of the mountain. I went to work each day, came home each night, and prayed. And after seven years, a messenger came down and offered me the work that I have with you—which was what I needed, when I needed it.

In the song that Larry and Jane and Denise performed with me this morning, Peter has to be exhorted to “rock himself a little harder,” to be constant in his belief. Peter, of course, is a nickname given to the apostle Simon by Jesus; it means, “the rock.” Jesus says that the church will be built upon Peter’s faith—his understanding, voiced first among the twelve, that Jesus is the Messiah. And yet, when Christ is taken by the authorities to be prosecuted, Peter three times denies knowing him, presumably out of a sliver of fear. In the song, he says to Paul in distress that though he knows that wanting a gun is foolish—like something out of a Laurel and Hardy routine, that it is not allowed under the rules of the game, the rules of Christianity that he helped to write—he wants one. He wants to break the rules because his beloved is fighting a war, because something important and personal and confusing, with seemingly no good resolution, is at stake.

We are Peter. When we are frightened, we lose faith. Our moral resolve is often as soft as unbaked clay. Whatever war we are given to fight, we think that God can’t possibly mean for us to apply love and patience to win it. We tell ourselves that it would be all right—indeed, necessary—in this circumstance, to draw our swords, to drive five miles over the limit. We imagine that only by satisfying our smallness and our selfishness can the peaceable kingdom be ushered in. We are unsteady.

And so we need Paul. We need to be in relationship with people who hold our hands and counsel us, even though they have seen us make the same mistakes over and over again. We need people who have faith in us. My friends have not loved me for my sins; they have loved me in spite of them. And their love enables me, in my best moments, to be compassionate and wise and persevering. Their faith gives me the grounding to have faith in others, to blow on the divine spark that God has placed within each of us. When Peter is afraid to practice God’s unconditional love, Paul tells him to think of peace, not as a dove, but as a dragon, as something so powerful that his feet are on fire with it. As Will Rogers might say, Peter is in the parade and Paul is sitting at the curb, clapping his heart out for him. Encouraging him. Reminding him that the terror that he feels is best alleviated by staying the course, by having faith.

My best friend in high school was devastatingly beautiful, and equally intelligent. Her father was a doctor; her mother was a fashion model. She, herself, rode horses and trained for the Olympics, and she could draw like Leonardo da Vinci. Great things were expected from her. Perhaps because of that, or because of events that befell her in childhood, anxiety never left her. At night, she would drive downtown in an old Rambler, sometimes with a gun in the glove compartment. She once said to me, “Sooner or later, everyone disappoints you.” This is inarguably true. And yet, I remember her statement, not for the force of her despair but for the grace that came over me in the face of it.

“Of course,” I replied, without thinking, but with confidence that came from something beyond me.

“Isn’t that beautiful? It means that we don’t have to be perfect to be loved.”

Imperfection, after all, is what characterizes us in relation to God. As in the Carl Dennis poem that the Sorensens read for us, it is hard to imagine that we are anything but a constant disappointment to the God—indeed, the Bible tells us as much. Moses has to plead for the lives of his brother and the Israelites worshipping that golden calf at the bottom of Mount Sinai, because God is understandably enraged by their vacuity. In Dennis’ poem, God is a fretful creator, a parent up at night pacing over the fatefully bad decisions that a child has made. But in that vision, what shows promise of healing our relationship with God is the effort that we make to send greetings to others, to write a letter to a long-ago friend, to love, over time, faithfully.

One of my friends said to me last week, “I know that you are not perfect. But, to me, you are perfect.” Let us love this way—enduringly, without fear or despair, keeping count only of our own sins, not those of others. In so doing, we demonstrate our faith not only in each other, but in the God who loves us.