



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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Believe It Or Not

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Growing up, I enjoyed amazing stories in *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*. The stories are incredible, all based on real people and natural phenomena. One story is of the original pair of “Siamese Twins,” Chang and Eng Bunker, who were physically connected their entire lives. They married the Yates sisters. Chang and Adelaide had ten children, and Eng and Sarah had eleven. Amazing creations of God. But do we believe it?

Do we believe that God creates all of us – people from the deserts and rainy cities and the tropics and ice-covered tundra? And all of our natural world – the soil, trees, grass, the creatures of flight and fin; the warmth of the sun and the breeze of the late afternoon?

In Matthew 23:13-26, Jesus places seven woes on temple leaders, the Pharisees. The woes are assessed for the leaders’ lack of belief, for the

damaging results of their blindness to the glory of God and their own hypocrisy. The woes are for belittling simple faith, for baptizing just to increase membership, for celebrating the riches humans place on the altar, and for revering that altar for its finery and craftsmanship, as well as the building in which it stands. The woes are for keeping up appearances while leaving the inside to rot.

The key passage is the fourth woe:

"For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others." (Verse 23b).

In his admonishment of the Temple leaders, Jesus addresses how unbelief and disbelief separate people from God. Our faith is by the grace of God, but doubt can take root in our susceptibility to being led astray. There is a nuanced difference in doubts. Doubting is a part of our humanity. Our doubts exist due to our human condition, weakness and frailty, and our lack of humility.

Believe it or not, doubts allow us to question and be in relationship with God and seek guidance from God. In order to cure doubts, we need God, the final, ultimate authority to hear us -- our cries, our questions, our anger. We speak to God and God responds by acting in us and through us.

In her book *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, Barbara Brown Taylor suggests ways to experience God, to see altars everywhere we go and in nearly everything we do. She counsels us to slow down, pay attention, and revere the world. In quiet reflection, we can commune with God to discover who we are and our purpose in God's mission.

All that we do hangs on our love of God and love of our neighbor. We glorify and thank God for providing all that we need. Our response is to place fruits of the earth on the altar, fruits that by God's action have been enabled to grow and be sown by human hands. It is God's action that makes the altar and all that is on it and the building in which it stands sacred.

These are extraordinary and frightening times. We look to God for guidance and wisdom in how to live, the leaders we follow, and the leaders we are

called to be. Like the incredible stories in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, the biblical story of the event that changed everything is located in human history.

Jesus Christ was born, lived, and died just as we do. He rose from the dead and is alive, ushering in the new creation of God's reign on earth. The resurrected Christ is the glimpse of God's Kingdom experienced by the authors of the New Testament. The stories are incredible, based on real people and natural phenomena.

Through their experiences, we can believe, and by God's grace we are enabled to believe. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we look to God and God's justice, mercy, and faith. God will cure the injustice of the world. God's action of mercy enables us to live by faith that God provides all that we need. And in that we can believe.