

Touching God

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John 20:19-31

1 Peter 1:3-9

Did you know that Thomas is the patron saint of theologians? Not the writer of this immensely theological fourth gospel; not Peter, considered the pillar of the church; not Paul, who systematized early Christian thinking in his letters. Thomas, who is mentioned in just 11 verses in the New Testament, five of those being lists of disciples; Thomas, the disciple best known as the doubter. This is the patron saint of theologians?

I must say, I'm rather tickled by this designation. Given the affirmations of doubt that both Cindy and I offered from the pulpit through the season of Lent, you might think that my delight is because a doubting Thomas could well find a receptive space in our pews for his skepticism. That is, to be sure, part of my affection for Thomas. But what I find really appealing is not simply that Thomas was initially a skeptic; but rather the means by which he came to believe and to proclaim "My Lord and my God!" What persuades him isn't a clever argument or apologetic for the resurrection. He is convinced by a sensory experience — sight, sound, touch. Yes, there is a rational element to demanding to see in order to believe. But it was a synthesis of thought and feeling that elicited his cry of faith.

We Mennonites prefer to leave talks of feelings to our Pietistic cousins, the Brethren, or to our Methodist friends who have their "hearts strangely warmed."¹ Faith, for us, is found in action and in the fruits of the Spirit. Among modern

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wesley

Mennos who live in big cities and have advanced degrees, reliance upon “feeling” as evidence of faith might seem quaint or even superstitious. And yet, even among us rational folk, in what other areas of our lives do we regard feeling with such suspicion? Do we select our romantic interests in an entirely rational manner? Do we measure our appreciation for art or music on a spreadsheet? Is there an equation to quantify our experience of nature? These experiences are largely subjective, and we accept that subjectivity.

Think about music collections. iPod playlists are sort of a modern fingerprint. What informs your choices? If you were to shuffle through my songs, I'm sure you would find a few things to enjoy, and a few to skip. I have a pretty unique collection of Renaissance polyphony, show tunes, pop, rock, folk, contemporary a cappella, African and “Glee” downloads. Don't judge.

My choices in music reflect my experience, my heritage, my education, my values, my ethnicity and whatever other elements make up that nebulous concept of aesthetic preference. If my music selections were entirely rational, it would make for a really boring musical experience. My taste in music is personal and subjective, and yet it overlaps and interacts with numerous environmental and cultural factors.

Each of us has a background, culture, history and education that informs our experience of God. Our congregation claims a particular narrative of faith that shapes our individual narratives — we're formed in a Biblical world view and grounded in Anabaptist/Mennonite theology and practice. Our experience is further shaped by living in a major metropolitan area where we intersect with

government, non-profit and academic centers of thought and power. Within that mixing pot each of us contributes a narrative of personal experience — our upbringing in our hometowns across the country and the world. A variety of church and non-church backgrounds. Histories of encounters with scripture and with faith — some shaped by abuse, some shaped by embrace.

There is no single, rational, normative, objective experience of God — no standard way of quantifying and describing our experience of faith. We should no more claim that everyone ought to encounter God exactly the same way as us than we should claim that everyone's musical tastes ought to line up with ours. That is the end result of entirely rationalistic thinking — conformity and the denial of the validity of individual experience.

Poor Thomas was the odd-man out when the other 10 disciples first encountered the resurrected Jesus. Consider this — would it not have made intellectual sense for him to accept the testimony of his 10 closest and most trusted friends? And yet, he needed more than words — he needed the sound of Jesus' voice, the vision of the wounded hands and the tangible experience of touching Jesus' wounds. By finally sharing in this physical encounter, Thomas was able to participate with the other disciples in their shared experience of Jesus as risen. The individual experience flowed into the corporate. In the same way our varied ways of encountering Jesus join together in a new, ongoing narrative, interacting with the stories of the past and laying a groundwork for the faith of the future.

In the reading from 1 Peter, we are told, “Although you have not seen [Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy... (1 Peter 1:8)” Here we have described the faith of the last 1,970-some years of Christians. We do not have the opportunity that Thomas had to see and touch Jesus in the flesh. But Peter appeals to the most irrational of human experiences — love. Our experience of Jesus' love is sustenance for belief. And how to describe love without using the language of feeling, of warmed hearts or lifted souls? I experience the love of Jesus when I join our congregation in singing. I sense Jesus' love when we pray together. Jesus is real and risen for me in the life of this congregation. And our response to the irrational experience of Jesus' love, as Peter describes it, is also irrational — indescribable and glorious joy.