

## Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Faith (Melanie Nogalski)

Text: Luke 2:40-42; Matthew 26:36-39

It is that time again. Schools have started; we blessed our school age children last week during the worship service. Baylor begins tomorrow and I will be treated to two hundred freshmen in a lecture hall both nervously and joyously anticipating the dawn of their college experience.

I have never escaped the routine of school. I have lived at the intersection of the church and the academy and have observed the impact that learning and education has had on students.

I chose the text from Luke today about Jesus' encounter with higher learning while he was still a boy. At the beginning of the selection read, we hear that as Jesus grew as a boy that he increased in wisdom. His family was also in the habit of going to Jerusalem for Passover every year. But the story Luke tells us is about that one year when Jesus was so caught up in learning and listening to the rabbis in Jerusalem that he forgot to join the caravan to return home. For such an obedient young man, his parents were more than a little upset. All was eventually forgiven, but Jesus' mother did not forget. She wondered what this meant. How could a child forget for three days that he needed to check in with mom and dad? And what was Jesus doing? He was "in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." Sometimes I think we assume that Jesus came pre-programmed to be the son of God, the guy with all of the answers. But here, Luke is quite clear in his words. Jesus was listening to the learned teachers and asking them questions. Jesus was constructing his knowledge and constructing how he understood others approached the sacred scriptures as well. Here is a clear example for us to listen, learn, and construct faith. Jesus listened and asked questions. He grew in wisdom and knowledge. God approved of his progress and those around him did the same.

But things don't always go so easily for everyone. I remember two bright young men—twins—who came to Southern Seminary many years ago. They were in Jim's Old

Testament classes and brought a fresh approach with their questions and keen interest. They came over to our house for a dessert party and lingered much later than the other students. It became clear that they wanted to be the last to leave but not until they said something they didn't want others to hear. They thanked Jim for being so open to their questions and patient with them. One said, "It stands out to us because when we were seniors in high school, we were asked to quit attending Sunday School because our questions made the teacher uncomfortable." Ouch! How many of you have been accused of asking questions that made someone at church uncomfortable? Yes, Lake Shore, I have heard many of these reflections over the years. Maybe our church could be described as "the church that asks the uncomfortable questions."

I read this in a letter to the editor in the Tribune-Herald last week. "I was raised a good, old fashioned Missionary Baptist. Now many decades along in my life, I consider myself more of a moderate Christian is you can accept that (and many Christians won't). The only reason I am not a regular practitioner is because I sometimes feel hypocritical about my own personal beliefs and what I've been told over the decades."

What is it that makes certain questions or ideas threatening? The church is supposed to provide answers to tough questions. And it tries. Sometimes who answers cry out for re-evaluation. We learn more about other ways of approaching matters of faith that differ from our own community.

When we talk of faith, and break into this kind of uncomfortableness, we are starting a process of de-construction. The stress of our questions starts to press on that faith. The insufficiency of the answers leaves us unsatisfied and wondering if there is a better approach. We start to discover what can hold and what can't. It isn't a destruction process but a disassembly and reassembly process.

Yesterday this very subject of faith and doubt was on the TED radio hour. A man named Greg began to follow Christ more intentionally as a college student. He loved the intellectual study of Christianity and went to seminary. He met his wife at a church and they built a life together as a Christian family. Then the day came when two policemen appeared on Greg's doorstep. His wife had died in a car accident. Thus began a crisis of faith for Greg. His entire world turned upside down. Could he still believe?

I don't know what kinds of de-constructing experiences you have had but I have heard some of your stories. In fact, that is what impressed me about Lake Shore when we joined 12 years ago. I heard stories from many of you when your questions were not welcome at church. Or, when the realities of your life and identity didn't fit the Christian corporate model and you didn't know if you had a church home anymore. Some of you embarked on a journey and found Lake Shore.

You have your reflections on de-constructing faith and I have mine. Mine are more reflective of institutional support (or non-support) of women in ministry. When I went to seminary in 1981, I wondered if Southern Baptists would ever get behind the women who clearly had experienced a call to ministry. I had great professors whom I knew were supportive of us and they gave me great hope. I saw signs that churches could accept women serving in ministry. I was one such woman. But then the Southern Baptist Convention took a decided turn towards a fundamentalist mindset. Outright hostility toward women in ministry was part of that turn. It was so bad and dramatic that many Baptists chose new paths. We formed new alliances—our church, for instance, is part of the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. What some might have done to twist and destroy our beliefs turned into new paths and commitments. As Peter said in Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men. And so we did. And so we do."

Reconstructing faith is an important part of this message. Even when things are coming down around us, there is a nascent whiff of something else that is happening. We read in the gospel of Matthew a hint of this as Jesus waited with his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was "grieved" the scripture reads as he pondered his fate. He knew. He knew. But the human Jesus didn't want to leave this life and implored God, his Father, to "let the cup pass." Jesus' sorrow and consternation was so great that even when he returns back to the disciples, he had to remove himself yet again to pray. And he did so a third time. Here is evidence of deconstruction. He still believes, after all he is praying to God. But he is conflicted. He wants to be anywhere but there. What was he thinking? Did he have a choice? Jesus concludes "Yet not what I want but what you want." In this statement, I hear faith being reaffirmed—faith in God to fulfill his purposes, faith that Jesus can hold the course, even with his human anguish.

Now you and I know that standing in the face of an enormous challenge that threatens to rip us apart makes it VERY difficult to say to God: “not what I want but what you want for me.” It is during such times that we hold on to what faith we can muster. Maybe it isn’t much. During such a time in my life, my mantra was to say to myself “believing in faith.” That was as close as I could get.

In a reconstructed faith, we keep our eyes and ears open. We don’t deny the doubts and how our faith feels fractured and possibly deconstructed. We hope for the glimmer of light. We rejoice when the light comes. Our soul breathes deep when we find that connection to God again.

Lake Shore, we are a motley group of pilgrims. Every Sunday, we engage in constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing faith. Jim sang today about a hope of growing up to be a child. Maybe we need to find that child in us once again. In the reconstructing of faith, and remembering the joys of faith, hope, and love, we just might find ourselves in what James Fowler calls “a second naivete.” After we have constructed faith and experienced parts that had to be chipped away, we still have to deal with the contradictions of life. Injustice still prevails, those who have nothing have even less, sickness interrupts our lives, we lose loved ones. But somehow the light is ahead. Maybe all we can muster is to believe in faith. But maybe we are about to follow the light in a new way. Novelist Morris West says it this way. “The act of faith is not a leap from darkness into light. It is the affirmation that light exists beyond the darkness.”

Many of you are familiar with the music of Carrie Newcomer. She will be singing at Lake Shore in October and I hope you will come to hear her. A song that I heard her first sing at Baylor some years ago remains one of my favorites. It is called “A Small Flashlight..”

The way is dark up ahead of me  
The way is dark and I cannot see  
What I love the most is a flashlight beam  
Lighting up the way when I cannot see.

Lake Shore – we continue to seek the light as a congregation. After a time of fellowship and lunch we will continue to chart our way forward. As a multi-generational church, we

have a mission to nurture faith in our young people, and celebrate faith realized and grown.