

What is Real?

July 15, 2018

You may have seen this banner before: [Show banner on wall]: "Our Hands Touch Jesus." It was made by a Sunday School class about fifteen or so years ago. I know because my daughter, and many other familiar people who are now in their mid-twenties, traced the hands. Their teachers were Kirsten and Marc Melchione, a fun, newly married couple.

I'll read all the names for you and give a description of their hands. Nick Schilke labeled his hands - "left" and "right;" Erin Gray's hands have multicolored skin and fingernails; Kirsten Melchione's hands and nails are a natural skin color; maybe she wrote for her husband, "These are Marc's hands;" Greg Sugar colored his hands the exact spectrum of the rainbow; Raymond Allen depicts black silhouettes of his hands; Andy Tobin colors just the fingers, but leaves the palms blank; Benjamin Macko makes his hands all colors, with no pattern, and the two hands are unmatched. I have to laugh at Jim Cornell's addition to the basic hands; he drew a severed arm off to the side with a suit sleeve and shirt cuffs. The hands are lined with green wrinkles, perhaps a reference to Frankenstein, another "life after death." Christina Brummund's hands seem to show a spreading stain, reminding me of Jesus' hands after being nailed to the cross. This banner fascinates me because it shows an artistic representation, however subconscious or deliberate, of the

minds that created the hands.

Being her mother, I focused on Christina's hands, and they started me thinking about Thomas, Jesus' disciple who is known as "Doubting Thomas." Jesus was such a kind teacher and preacher for Thomas. After re-reading today's scripture, I do not believe that Jesus was chastising Thomas for his skepticism. Jesus takes Thomas' hands and guides him to touch the holes of crucifixion in his hands and sides. Thomas needed to see the proof that Jesus truly was who he said he was. Although Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe," he does not put Thomas down for his doubt; Jesus assures Thomas, almost as one does with a child, what is real. Thomas could not think in the abstract, or maybe his faith was still in the living, breathing Christ. Maybe Thomas did not yet understand there was something more.

I've been pondering about what is reality in this life. The philosophical debate occurring in my mind did not start with faith and God, but it ended up there - with Thomas. Actually, ~~it~~ began with the widening gulf between me and social technology, and the realization that I just don't want to bridge that gulf. I think I'm becoming my Uncle Bud, who refused to use his video cassette recorder. If the Red Sox game was not broadcast at a convenient time,

Bud used his taped-together transistor radio as back-up technology, and we all loved him for it, with the wink of an eye. You can wink behind my back, because I will not be using a SmartPhone and I will soon be retiring my disposable cell phone. I have tried to keep up with computer skills because of my job, but now my hands don't like typing and I can think much better with a pen and paper. Regarding social technology, I notice how some people look down at their phones when they are in a beautiful place outside, or look down to receive other messages when they are face-to-face with a real human.

I questioned whether these folks were participating in "real life." Then came the bigger question, "What constitutes Real Life?"

I'll share my thought process on this question. The five senses were my first answer to what is real. What we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell are real to us. Jesus' friend Thomas relied on his senses to verify that Jesus had really risen from the dead. We are also aware of our body's ^{real} signals: hunger, pain, and fatigue.

What about our brain's ability to think, dream, imagine, pretend, and create? These functions make us uniquely human. ^{yet,} They are all invisible unless we produce some product that represents these miraculous workings of our brain, such as: an invention, a dance, a song, our thoughts written as essays, poems, or stories, a drama we act out, musical compositions, a mathematical equation... These are realities we can create.

I think that our use of the SmartPhone fits in here. We are performing invisible brainwork and communication, beginning in our minds, passing through the electronic device, to another person's mind. It's almost telepathic, and yes, even real.

And what about our hearts, our emotions, which, rationally, we know come from our brains, but are felt in the core of our beings? Sometimes we can see telltale signs of emotions: smiles and frowns, tears and laughter, yet many of our feelings are hidden inside, under control, or floating around, yet unidentified, waiting to rise to the surface. Human emotion is powerful enough to rule our days, yet it is often unseen. Without a doubt, emotions exist. They are real.

Let's take reality to an even more abstract dimension - the belief in a higher power, an acknowledgment and trust in a deity we have never seen or experienced with any of our senses. We did not create this God in our imagination, we learned of God through the teachings of the Bible, our elders or contemporaries, through books, movies, and songs. We do not have an "original source." We did not hear God speaking to us in the burning bush, or hear God call us in the night, or meet the risen Christ outside his empty tomb, or ^{even} encounter him in a locked room one night with our fellow disciples. We only know the stories. Yet, they are the basis for our faith.

And, of course, there are countless other deities in different cultures around the world, with all the stories and beliefs that surround them. The fact that so many people,

the world over, share a belief in a caring, knowing, powerful God cannot be simply coincidence. Belief in God is a common need, a common comfort, and helps fulfill a common purpose.

... What is real? What is true? I look out and see all of you. Here we are, gathered in this sacred sanctuary, yet we are not all the same. I think each of us has developed our own "working faith." We have come to, or are journeying toward, our own set of beliefs. Each person here has a different past, present, and future, so might it be that God facilitates the evolution of our own personal faiths? We can build our own relationship with God. Doubts, questions, and explorations are all parts of that growing relationship.

We all believe, we all search; we know that we cannot see God, but our hands can touch Jesus, in the form of the person sitting near us in the pews, or in some unexpected place on the path of our daily lives. Jesus said he is the vine and we are the branches. Our branches can reach out and make God a real and tangible truth. Share your gifts, as did Moses, Samuel, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Thomas. You are part of a visible faith. Accept that "not knowing" can be a partner of faith. Be aware that each person's faith is unique to their own lives and that is a blessing from God! We are made in the image of God and have been given the most amazing ability to think and analyze... But faith is greater than our ability to understand it. We can simply be grateful to nurture our faith, and know, as Jesus said, that we are blessed because we have not seen, and yet we believe. And that alone is sufficient and true.

-Jenny Brummund