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Texts: I Peter 3: 13-16; Luke 1: 26-34
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New Lines of Faith to Trace

Earlier this summer I read a profile of a church in the city of Austin, Texas, the St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.¹ It's the church that Senate candidate James Talarico has attended since childhood - the place of his baptism as an infant, and a place he still calls home decades later. The article presented the church as something of a curiosity, though nothing about it was particularly odd. For example, it was noted that their pastor reaches for alternative language for "God," since that word has been so often misused and abused. It was also noted that the congregation tends to avoid using the word "Lord," because it's a metaphor that evokes a wealthy, European, male feudal figure. The article went on to say that the congregation uses an inclusive language version of the Bible, and that many church members freely voiced their reluctance about the teachings of the Apostle Paul, especially concerning women. They have a robust LGBTQI+ ministry, and they've been vocal in their support and welcome of the trans community. They do work on immigration and human rights, and believe that the ministry of Jesus has to do with caring for and honoring those that are shunned in many parts of our society. A sign on their front lawn proclaimed "The Bombing of Civilians is Always Wrong." Nothing about the description felt strange. St. Andrew's is a thriving congregation, and honestly, it felt a little like reading about a far-off cousin you've never met. The church reminded me quite a bit of FCCOL.

What intrigued me most about the article was the tone. It was presented almost as if the people of St. Andrew's were practicing an exotic and heretofore unknown form of religion there in the wilds of Austin. It assumed an absolute ignorance among its readers about progressive Christian churches, which is probably accurate. But it also suggested a curiosity and a hunger for the kind of faith practiced at St. Andrew's, and at other places like it, including here at FCCOL.

, we're all here, which means that most of us know that we belong to a long and proud lineage that wasn't invented yesterday. We have roots dating back two thousand years, with a specific form of faith that is now several hundred years old. While I know it may not be news to many of us, I thought it might be helpful at the start of a new church year to highlight a few of the things that characterize our form of faith, and that make us who we are. It may be that FCCOL is new for some of you, or it may be that you're still trying to find your feet here after a few years.

¹ "Are Texans Ready for Talarico's Kind of Christianity?" in *The New York Times*, June 1, 2026. By Ruth Graham and J. David Goodman.

Whatever background you may or may not have, it's good for all of us to be reminded of where we come from, and of what makes us unique.

And so here are three themes I'd like to lift up this morning: we belong to a free and a freeing tradition; we belong to a learned tradition, but also a humble tradition, owning up to the many things we simply do not know; and we belong to an activated, which is to say, an activist tradition. I'll say a word about each of those.

Let's start with this: the kind of faith we practice here at FCCOL falls into the category of what is often called "liberal" theology, or "liberal" Christianity. The root of the word "liberal" is from the Latin, *libera*, and it simply means "free." That word was first applied to theology by a German biblical scholar named Johann Semler in 1774. When Semler used the word, people in Europe were busy freeing themselves from the authority of kings and creeds and hierarchies. What he meant was the freedom to think and the freedom to be, without the weight of dogma or institutions bearing down on you, telling you how you must behave, how you must believe, how you must exist.

It was another German named Friedrich Schleiermacher who really jump started this thing called "liberal," or freeing, faith. The late 18th and early 19th centuries were times of convulsive change throughout Europe: the sciences were challenging previous understandings about how old the planet was - it was more and more clear that Genesis was not an accurate depiction of how the world came into being; scholars were learning a lot more about the origins of the Bible and their lack of historicity; revolutions were occurring in the U.S., in France, and in Haiti; industrialization was taking shape; and travel was making the planet, and thus the many cultures and ritual practices of the planet, more accessible to ordinary people. For a host of reasons, the late 18th and early 19th centuries parallel our own time.

Schleiermacher understood those challenges. He witnessed the way people responded, on one hand, by retreating into a fortress of received dogmas, a kind of precursor to fundamentalism (a term that wasn't coined until the 1920's). On the other hand, others responded by rejecting religion altogether as something childish or superstitious. Schleiermacher created a way for people to retain their faith while still taking seriously all the challenges to older forms of belief. He argued that the ground of religion took place in the human heart, emerging from the same place where poetry and imagination originated. And he argued that no church, state, or even biblical authority could interfere with that basic freedom of the human soul standing before the infinite, in touch with the divine. The soul exists in freedom.

Ever since that time, churches that came to practice this liberal, freeing form of faith have had an ear for other freedom movements, where people have sought to extricate themselves from forms of authority that diminished their humanity. Liberal churches have participated in the suffrage of women and in the abolition of slavery; they have participated in the struggles of the colonized to free themselves from dominating powers, and they have sought to demolish the walls

of Jim Crow; they have stood with the gay men who rose up at Stonewall and with the lesbian women who joined that fight. These days, it's why supporting the rights of the undocumented, and of the trans community, have been important in churches like ours. It is because we are a part of a free and a freeing tradition, a never ending project that requires constant participation and upkeep.

If ours is a free and freeing tradition, it is also a humble tradition. Here's what I mean by that: we know enough to know all that we don't know. It's true, we come from a line of immensely learned people, who helped to found places like Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Brown. Schleiermacher himself was the primary architect for what came to be known as the modern research university, a division of knowledge that's still in use today. But the earliest thinkers of the liberal tradition sensed the limits of human perception, and thus the limits of their knowledge.

Immanuel Kant is another late 18th century German who did as much to shape the contours of our tradition as Schleiermacher. He began his formidably difficult (and very knowledgeable) book, *Critique of Pure Reason*, by saying that he was interested in denying knowledge in order to make room for faith. Which is to say, he was interested in sketching out the limits of human reason, in order to avoid the arrogance and chauvinism displayed by religious folks and secular folks alike, who used their claims to knowledge as a cudgel.

It may seem odd to say it, but Kant's gesture is born from the same spirit that animates Mary's response when she is told she will bear the child Jesus. "How can this be?" she wonders, which is a way of disclosing the limits of her own knowing. Those words stake out a kind of humility before the mysteries of the world that far too many in the Christian tradition have ignored. We can therefore say that while there are truths around which we can and do organize our lives, we are reluctant about claiming we have an absolute purchase on those truths. We make space for the question, "How can this be?" We freely give voice to the words, "I don't know," for ours is a humble tradition.

Not long ago, I read a lecture given by Wislawa Szymborzka, a Polish poet who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. She was speaking about what it is to be inspired, and her words apply to the kind of freeing, but also humble faith that we practice around here. She says this:

There is, has been, and will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits...Their work becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep discovering new challenges in it. Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know."

But Szymborska then goes on to consider what happens when the world is drained of inspiration, when the phrase, "I don't know" ceases to be spoken. She says:

All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues struggling for power by way of a few loudly shouted slogans also enjoy their jobs, and they too perform their duties with inventive fervor. Well, yes, but they “know.” They know, and whatever they know is enough for them once and for all. They don’t want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish their arguments’ force.

She then concludes:

This is why I value that little phrase “I don’t know” so highly. It’s small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended.²

We too have been inspired. We too are on an adventure of the spirit, one that depends upon the ability to say, “I don’t know.” That admission of humility is an important part of the foundation upon which the life of faith is built.

Finally, this: we are an activated, and therefore an activist people. This too is a part of our religious DNA, built into the very core of our tradition. When we participate in the public struggles of our own era, when we show up at marches or petition our legislators or engage in civil disobedience, we do so not because we’re confused about the role of religion in the contemporary world. We do so because it’s a part of our lineage of faith.

One of the most notable examples of becoming activated grew out of this liberal faith tradition in the ministry of Walter Rauschenbusch, a figure that deserves to be more widely recognized in our churches. Rauschenbusch was an American Baptist minister who wound up serving a congregation in Hell’s Kitchen during the Gilded Age, when incredible wealth was concentrated in the hands of a very few - J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and Andrew Carnegie, among others. They were busy transforming the face of the city in their own image, while ordinary people, many of them immigrants, were struggling a short walk away from their mansions.

That was certainly true in Hell’s Kitchen. Rauschenbusch grew tired, and then infuriated, at having to conduct funerals for young children, and at the starvation and disease occurring around him. He became even more frustrated with churches who didn’t have anything to say about such things, those who preached that religion had to do with one’s personal, private behavior, and nothing more. For Rauschenbusch, that was a betrayal of Jesus himself. He worked to address the acute needs in his neighborhood, and he went on to publish a very influential book in 1907 called *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. It’s a classic worth revisiting. In essence, it follows what Jesus says in Matthew 25 - “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you

² All quotes from Szyborska, Wislawa, *The Acrobat: Essential Poems* (New York: Ecco Press, 2026), “The Poet and the World,” pgs. 67ff.

did it to me,” Jesus says. In large part, it’s because of Rauschenbusch that churches have food pantries and soup kitchens today. It’s because of Rauschenbusch that we focus on systemic injustices that prevent people from having enough to eat, or from receiving health care, or from having a decent place to live.

Here at FCCOL, beginning just after 1907, Edward Chapman, our 14th senior minister, began introducing Rauschenbusch’s teachings into this church. He continued doing so until 1916, when he departed for Rochester, in part, we believe, because he wished to be closer to Rauschenbusch, who was by then working and teaching in that city. That’s simply to say that we have been an activated, and therefore an activist, community for a long time now. We owe much of who we are to Walter Rauschenbusch.

Now, I may be wrong, but I have the sense that there’s a hunger out there for a free and freeing kind of faith right now. I have the sense that there’s a craving for an intelligent, and therefore for a humble kind of faith, one that’s willing to say, “we don’t know.” And I have the sense that there’s a desire for an activated form of faith, willing to live into the teachings of Jesus, especially as found in Matthew 25. Voices proclaiming the opposite have had the floor for too long now - rigid, arrogant, and selfish voices - and I think lots of people are ready for something different. In other words, I sense an incredible opening right now to share who we are, and to live into this freeing form of faith.

Here at the cusp of a new year, I hope we’ll find ways to extend this vision. I hope we’ll have the courage to invite friends who may have been turned off by other forms of religion to explore what we do here at FCCOL. I hope we’ll use the electronic tools we have, some of which are about to be vastly enhanced, to communicate our vision. I hope we’ll show up in public places as proud practitioners of a freeing tradition, and I hope we’ll keep exploring among ourselves what this will all mean for the future. We have an exciting adventure awaiting us, and I hope that each of you will be a part of it.

Always be ready to give an account of the hope that is inside you. So it says in the epistle of First Peter. I have a profound hope about all that is to come, at FCCOL and beyond, for we are part of a proud lineage that has shown us the way. May we find the wisdom and courage to trace new lines of faith in our own time.