

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Standing by a river, dying of thirst



In her book *Finding Our Voices: Women, Wisdom, and Faith* (Crossroad, 1997), Patricia O'Connell Killen tells about a group of women who had met to consider how their church heritage related to their lives. Killen asked them, "Why have you come to this session?" One quickly answered, "Because I feel like I'm standing by a river, dying of thirst."

**My soul thirsts
for God, for the
living God.**
—Psalm 42:2

"We all knew what she meant," says Killen. The woman was longing for God, and her longing was not being fed by her Christian heritage as she experienced it in her church.

Killen's book mainly addresses women, but she admits that other groups—especially the poor, persons of color, and even the laity—often experience simultaneous hunger for God and disillusionment with their church or religious heritage, too. People in these groups often find that church traditions and methods make them feel unwanted and unheard. Killen recognizes that some men also feel this way although men are rarely ignored as a group. Killen's experience is mainly in the Catholic church, in which women and the laity have less voice than in most Protestant churches, but her advice can help anyone who has been disillusioned or mistreated by a church.

Insight can come from disillusionment

When we realize we're feeling both hunger and disillusionment, says Patricia Killen, we're actually looking for a transforming insight. And surprisingly, such insight often begins in heartbreaking experiences of disillusionment.



Wise faith

In *Finding Our Voices*, Patricia Killen urges us to seek wise faith. She points out that both Jewish and Christian scriptures identify wise people as those who discern the workings of God's Spirit, both in specific, concrete situations and in the sweep of historical events.

**[God] is the source of
your life in Christ,
who became for us
wisdom from God ...**
—1 Corinthians 1:30

Wisdom's goal, as Killen sees it, is rich life for individuals and communities. And wisdom doesn't defer fulfillment of individual life or community life to any future time or place. It deals with the present.

Killen finds that "wisdom's concerns lead to a distinctive understanding and practice of authority, one quite different from that practiced in the church today." Wisdom, she notices, "does not justify its claims by appeal to scripture, doctrine, role, office, or divine or human government." Instead, wisdom measures the authority of a teaching by the fruit it bears in the common experience of the community. Moral failure, from this perspective, is "unwillingness to read the signs of the times and to discern the processes that make for life and for death for ourselves and for our communities."



In Killen's view, wise faith is mature and courageous faith. It includes the ability and the willingness to do the following things.

★ When our best judgment tells us that our tradition is being misused or misinterpreted, say so.

**"See, I am sending you
out like sheep into the
midst of wolves; so be
wise as serpents and
innocent as doves."**
—Matthew 10:16

★ Endure opposition, even from church leaders and people we care about, if our discernment tells us the opposition is misplaced.

★ Trust our perceptions of where injustice exists, even when others don't share them.

Doing these things isn't easy or comfortable, but it's often what God calls Christians to do.

Some responses won't help

We're almost sure to encounter obstacles on the way to that transforming insight, Killen points out, but we can't let them deter us. She mentions several responses that we may be tempted to make but need to avoid when the obstacles appear. These responses won't help us or help the church.



- We may blame ourselves. When we aren't finding spiritual food in the church, we may assume that everyone else *is* finding it, so we tell ourselves, "Something must be wrong with me." Also, when people oppose our efforts for change we may assume that the problem is in ourselves. And supporters of the church status quo are very likely to encourage us to make these assumptions. After all, for others, blaming us is often more comfortable than looking at themselves.



- We may get mad, become overcritical of the people around us, and speak to them in harsh ways that keep them from hearing what we're saying. In doing this, Killen finds, we tend to focus nearsightedly on our own experiences and feelings and overlook other important factors. We expect nothing of value to come from our church. And we automatically dismiss whatever doesn't match what we already think. This stance, says Killen, often provides cleansing and intensifying energy that is helpful early in the journey of faith, but staying at this point leads only to cynicism and despair.

- We may give up because we find conflict and disagreement so uncomfortable. All we want to do is subdue the pain. We try to subdue it either by dropping out or by merely willing ourselves to conform to our church's expectations. Change nearly always brings some conflict, however, even when it's much-needed change. And although forced conformity may leave what Killen calls "a veneer of comfort in certitude and righteousness," it costs us our very selves. Besides, when this fake kind of certitude fails, as it eventually does, Killen warns, "it leaves only deeper pain, exhaustion, disillusionment, and blind rage."

If these responses won't help, what will?

Our experience and our heritage

To find the transforming insight we need, we must draw not only on our own



experience of God but also on our Christian heritage. Even though Christian tradition includes oppression and abuse, it also contains deep, powerful, liberating truth. It contains insight and affirmation that none of its official interpreters or keepers can finally obscure. "The Christian faith," Patricia

Killen reminds us, "is deeper and bigger than any particular articulation of it by any particular leadership or interest group at any particular time."

We can therefore draw on our tradition's valuable resources while also being critical of it. "A religious tradition that has helped to create oppression can be subverted and transformed by its own more powerful resources," Killen points out. Those resources are the waters of the river we're standing by. They can satisfy our thirst and also change the world.

Resources we can use

What resources, then, can we draw on to counteract the harm that some of our Christian heritage has done? Which of its resources can bring us Christ's living water? I've found it especially in these..

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me ..."
—John 7:37



Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.
—Amos 5:24

Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?
—Matthew 15:2

• Scriptures

Many emphasize God's command to recognize and combat injustice. Many show God commanding people to speak out about traditional religious practices that contradict God's will.

• Stories of brave Christians

Even risking death, many have spoken publicly and actively worked to change secular customs or church practices that they saw were against God's will.



• Contact with other Christians

Many are standing by the church river and dying of thirst. Finding them may be hard, because many assume they're alone and thus keep quiet. Finding each other is important, however, and our speaking helps that happen. It lets thirsty-but-silent Christians know they're not alone,



and that discovery will give some of them the courage to speak. When many of us speak, we support each other and make change more likely to happen.

Questioning is faithful, not faithless

It's important to remember that questioning the church, noticing where change is needed, and working to promote needed change are faithful acts, not faithless ones. As Patricia Killen reminds us, "doubts and critical questions not only are valid and essential parts of our journeys in faith, but actually nurture faith by moving us more deeply into our lives and into our religious heritage." Unfortunately we rarely hear that message in our churches.



Another feature of faith that is vitally important but rarely emphasized in churches, Killen observes, is that "on the journey of faith our relationship to a religious heritage must be renegotiated repeatedly." If we're growing, our view of our tradition will change as we grow. Our perspective will keep expanding.

We come out of hiding and touch God

Jesus said, "Someone touched me ..." When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; ... she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been healed. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well ..." —Luke 8:46-48

Once we start coming out of the crowd and using our voices, Killen assures us, like the woman who touched Jesus's robe we can never again be ignorant, naive, or anonymous to ourselves. Why? Because in finding our real voices we touch God.

But won't coming out of hiding be uncomfortable? Probably so, espe-

cially at first. Won't speaking up make us unpopular and lonely? It may, because many people are frightened by the challenges a person with an authentic voice presents. Some hearers therefore react by criticizing such voices, dismissing them, questioning their faithfulness, integrity, and motivation, or even shunning the speakers. "Nearly any cover will do," Killen finds, "in order to avoid the hard questions these [voices] raise for us."

In the church, especially, speaking out is very likely to bring rejection by those in charge. "Working out of an almost overpowering desire for self-survival," observes Patricia Killen, "religious institutions and their leaders want [members] to remain in the place where they accept what the authorities say. Institutions feel more comfortable with members who are meek, obedient, and adoring."

Cleaning up the river



Neither the church nor our own personal relationship with Jesus can give us in absolutely pure condition the water we thirst for. Human shortcomings pollute all the rivers that contain Christ's living water, so expecting perfection from them is unrealistic. It's important for us to keep working, however, to remove as much pollution as possible and to prevent new pollution as much as we can. We must help make the rivers' water drinkable.

While doing that, we must also keep drawing on the lifegiving resources of our Christian heritage and on the support of other Christians who recognize the pollution and are seeking and finding God's thirst-quenching water. Drawing on those resources gives us the discernment and courage we need for cleaning up the rivers we're standing by.



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

Seeing, feeling, reflecting, choosing, speaking

Our hunger and disillusionment, says Patricia Killen, call us to wise faith—the surprising, unsettling gift that can come when we recognize that our religious heritage contains both death and life. Developing wise faith involves learning how to be nourished by that heritage while at the same time seeing and actively resisting the harm it sometimes inflicts.

To move toward wise faith, Killen finds, we must notice, feel, and reflect on all our experiences. We must honestly face both the life-giving and the death-dealing elements in our religious heritage. Then we

must choose a future way of living that will avoid repeating the aspects of the past that have demeaned us and threatened to destroy us. We also must say what we know. We must find our voices and use them.

**Blessed are those who
hunger and thirst for
righteousness, for
they will be filled.**

—Matthew 5:6

Taking these steps, Killen assures us, requires considerable personal courage. The journey to wise faith isn't easy. But we need to make it, and the church and the world need us to make it.

Barbara

Critics keep a community vital

"Over and over again," writes Mary Farrell Bednarowski in a recent article (*Sisters Today*, Nov. 2000, Liturgical Press), "women tell two different kinds of stories about their relationships to their traditions, usually in the same breath—stories of alienation and stories of transformation."



This reaction isn't limited to women, of course. Both men and women often feel both love and anger, both gratitude and bitterness, both affection and disgust, and both weariness and hopefulness when they look at the church. But this kind of ambivalence, Bednarowski observes, is full of valuable creative energy. It enables us to be both participants in the church and dissenters, and both of those roles are vital, not only for us individually but also for the church. "A community that does not have critics who care about it," Bednarowski assures us, "will not stay vital." She assures us, too, that healing doesn't just mean "making better." Rather, it often "has much more to do with radical enterprises that require the diagnosis of social and spiritual ills ... and the taking of action to fight against them."



Real healing, it seems, for each of us individually and also for the church groups we're part of, requires more than just finding ways to slake our personal thirst, even though slaking it is important. The kind of healing God calls us to promote requires actively working to clean up the church river when it has become too polluted to furnish the living water of Christ.