

Dan Phillips: A Faith Trip to China

Sermon presented at Seekers worship
October 26, 1997
by Dan Phillips

A Faith Trip to China

Recently, Martha and I went to China to see our youngest son, Jon, get married. This morning I would like to tell you about that trip, and what it meant to me in terms of my faith journey, and to comment on how it maybe applies to Seekers as well.

We traveled from here to Taiyuan, China, the hometown of our new daughter-in-law Rong. There, we met the family, parents, brother, sister, sister-in-law, and attended the wedding. We visited Woo Tai Shan, a resort area containing several old (only 600 years old) temples and pagodas. From there, we went on to Beijing, and visited the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, and the Summer Palace.

During this time we traveled by plane, bus, taxi, van, train, and city bus. We ate Chinese food about two-thirds of the time. We met only a handful of people who spoke English (and we knew NO Chinese when we left America!). We saw places we had heard about as strange and wonderful, but never expected to see. We met new family for the first time. (Meeting in-laws is not always easy, and I'm not sure whether the fact that we could not speak to many of them directly made things harder or easier.) And we encountered a culture different from our own.

Something this dramatic (traumatic?) will have an effect on anyone's life, and we were no exception. From our previous

experiences in foreign countries, we understood that making the most of the travel opportunity means embracing the new and the different. We went with the expectation that we would see and do new things. And as a member of Seekers, I want the changes in my life to be reflected in my relationship to God and this group.

So what did China offer as a stop on the Faith Journey? Well, first, it taught the immediacy of prayer. Every time we climbed into an automobile there, we began to pray. I think it had something to do with the traffic! The Chinese do not stop! I saw no stop signs in the entire country, and only a minimum of traffic lights. Instead, they come to a corner, and slow down, and merge into the oncoming traffic. Now this approach is very scary to an American, but it works there. And over time I came to understand that there is a method to this seeming madness: they trust each other. Each driver relies on the other drivers to cooperate, to get along, to allow the other drivers their chance to go along.

This led me to a closer examination of the Chinese culture as a whole. And I saw that this traffic philosophy was reflected in all walks of Chinese life: everyone gives a little, and everyone goes along. Now this may have implications that we Americans do not like, particularly in the social and political world. But it reflects a country where each person has some trust in each other person. And our society is sadly lacking in this faith in each other. We often appear to be a society based more on fear than on faith, on distrust rather than trust. We rush to claim victim status for ourselves lest anyone else be a greater victim, and then expect us to help them. We carry guns with us waiting for someone to cut us off in traffic, or bump our bicycle! China by contrast is more peaceful.

In the story in Mark that was read, the blind man shows a faith in the ability of one person: Christ. And that faith is rewarded. I'm not suggesting that everyone we trust this

coming week will work a miracle, but such concepts as social justice, equality, empowerment, and democracy depend on some trust in each other. And certainly our journey together as a community of faith requires that we believe in each other, that we rely on each other. So I saw in China that one element of FAITH is trust in others.

Another aspect of faith became apparent as we traveled through this giant country. I had some extreme difficulty because I could not talk to the people I met. Talking being one of my major hobbies, I had to find another way to communicate. I relied heavily on smiling and gestures, but I did learn one phrase from my son Jon. □While at Woo Tai Shan, we visited several Buddhist temples. There, Jon told us about the four Buddhas: the traditional Buddha, the Healing Buddha, the Pure Lands Buddha (or Paradise Buddha) and the Happy Buddha (or Buddha of the future). After this, for reasons you can guess, I began to identify with the Happy Buddha. And my son taught me the phrase: “Wa shurr mei lor foi” (apologies for my phonetic spelling). This means: “I am the Happy Buddha”. The Chinese who heard me use this phrase while rubbing my (ample) stomach went into gales of laughter, and that thoroughly broke the ice in many situations.

Now while this was fun, and allowed me to act out my clownish nature in a foreign country, the concept of the Happy Buddha intrigued me. I was particularly intrigued by the fact that the Buddha of the future was NOT associated with the Paradise Buddha, but with the Happy Buddha. And this said to me that the expectation is that happiness is a part of the future, and not just a part of paradise! One of the charges that has often been leveled at Christianity is that it is a “pie in the sky, by and by” religion, preaching that our reward is after this life, somewhere else. Here, in the Buddhist concept, was a teaching that our desire for happiness should lead us to expect it in our future here, rather than in a Paradise removed from this earth.

And this was in accord with Chinese society and culture today: they are working as hard as they can to make their country, their lives, better. This faith that things can be better, that happiness is attainable here on earth, is often missing in our Christian experience. We are easily discouraged into expecting nothing better until Christ returns, or we die. But an important part of faith is that belief in the future, in its possibilities and opportunities. Because this portion of faith helps us to work for what should be, and work cheerfully. We see in the passage in Psalms that trust (faith) is associated with deliverance here on earth; that it is related to where we are now.

So what does all this mean to me, and to Seekers. Well, we must surely rely on each other. In a community organized as we are, led as we are, all must participate, and all must be trusted. And we must embrace our future, whether as individuals, or as a community. Embrace it with an expectation of happiness, and a belief that our work, our efforts can contribute to that happiness.

Faith as trust in each other and a belief that our efforts can make a better future. These seem like such simple ideas. I wonder why I had to go so far to notice them.