

Believe

The English language is a very efficient language.

If you ever attended a Mass in the Hawaiian language or French or Polish or any of a number of other languages, you may notice the service takes longer, because in many languages, more words or longer words are needed to convey certain ideas or convictions.

One reason English is so efficient is because one word can be used to convey all kinds of meanings.

It is one of the strengths of our language.

It is also one of its profound weaknesses.

I mention this because the rest of the sermon will be in Polish...

Actually, I mention this because right in the middle of today's gospel lesson is probably the best-known sentence in the entire Bible, and it hangs on probably the best-known word in the entire Bible.

You see it held up, as chapter and verse at football games – there's always somebody at each end zone with the sign: "John 3:16."

John 3:16 says this: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have life everlasting."

Here's the rub.

What does it mean to *believe* in Jesus?

Our word "believe" gets used in all sorts of ways.

If you're a Neil Diamond fan, you can hum along as he sings: "I believe in new beginnings, extra innings, brand new starts..." the song my bride and I danced to at our wedding.

You can "believe" in your favorite team, or politician or that the latest chocolate pudding is the best ever.

Right after this sermon, we will rise and recite what we believe when we say the Nicene Creed.

So what is it to "believe" in Jesus?

Because our language often uses one word to describe many things, meanings can get flattened out; so that today, you'll hear people say that the belief needed for salvation is simply an intellectual assent; a brain-uttered "yes" to the idea that Jesus is the Son of God.

And perhaps because "I believe" is so easily said, perhaps that's one reason why Christianity seems to have lost so much of its power to transform lives, to transform societies.

So what is Jesus getting at?

The gospel lesson gives some clues.

To "believe" is to come to the light, as verses 20 and 21 so eloquently say.

To come to the light means changing who we are; so that to "believe" in Jesus, at least in a way that begins to break us down and out of old habits, of old certainties, is probably something more than simply a mental assent to an idea; but may compel an about face -- away from a life of self-sufficiency, of common

sense and “the way things are,” and a turning toward the upside down, and the counter intuitive; toward the odd ways of God.

It’s the wheelbarrow story that I haven’t mentioned for awhile.

Everyone has a favorite story and this is mine.

About Jake and Harry walking downtown by those tall twin glass towers.

They are on the street and see a guy put a long skinny board between the two buildings, and the guy is ready to wheel a wheelbarrow across from one building to the next.

Jake turns to Harry and says, “you think that guy can wheel that wheelbarrow across that skinny board to the other building?”

“Sure, why not,” says Harry.

“Well, do you believe he can do it?”

“Whatdayamean?”

“Go sit in the wheelbarrow while he rolls it over that board to the other building!”

Lent is that season of the year when all believers are encouraged to ask:

“When it comes to my faith, am I standing on the sidewalk or is my butt in the wheelbarrow?”

Because God so loves the world he gives us Jesus, because in Jesus, God climbs into the wheelbarrow with us.

It's not, as some of the more modern translations say that God loves us *so much* that he gives us Jesus; it's not that at all.

Giving us Jesus *is the way* God chooses to love us.

Annie Dillard is a favorite author of mine, and when I tell you about wearing crash helmets in church and being lashed to the pews, that's Annie Dillard.

She also says this:

God suffers the world's necessities along with us, and suffers our turning away, and joins us in exile." (*For the Time Being*).

It's what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Ephesians today.

"You were dead through trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, but now by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing."

God, it seems, is determined to have us.

So determined that the second person of the Trinity comes among us, becomes one of us, and takes on the worst of what we are as human beings; and when we have done it all to him, he turns to us and says: "I love you."

We Episcopalians are a polite group of worshippers.

I'm glad, because that's where I'm comfortable too.

We don't dance and shout in the aisles, nobody bursts out in tongues at St. Elizabeth's; and if they did, I probably wouldn't be here; nor would most of you, I suspect.

But perhaps by being so polite, we may sometimes miss the deep emotion, the sheer craziness, the mind-bending truth of our faith.

We polite Christians sometimes forget to remember that:

"Jesus isn't going to teach us how to be respectable, or even how to be "good" in the way our culture usually means the word.

Perhaps we forget to remember that following Jesus is not a program for self-improvement; it's an invitation to a community.

It's a radical dislocation from those relationships that create and continue injustice, death, and alienation so that we can be knit into relationships that bring healing, reconciliation, and life rooted in the eternal."

Sarah Breuer, *The Witness* (paraphrase).

Maybe that's why Nicodemus is holding his head in his hands as he stumbles away from his midnight encounter with Jesus.

Just before today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is having the more familiar part of his famous encounter with Nicodemus.

As you know, Nicodemus is a member of the religious establishment who's nevertheless fascinated with Jesus.

And Jesus tells him he needs to be born anew.

And Nicodemus protests that old men can't climb back into the womb.

And Jesus shakes his head at the density of this religious heavyweight.

Jesus tells him that strange and ancient story of God sending poisonous snakes to bite the angry Israelites, who prefer slavery

to freedom; only to have God tell Moses to make a snake idol out of bronze, which, when the people look at it, cures snake bites.

Nicodemus has a really bad headache.

He's not getting any of this.

Are you getting a headache too....?

What is Jesus talking about?

"A pastor friend told me about the day a very disturbing telephone call came into the church office.

A part-time staff member, who had been out in his neighborhood walking his dog, had been mugged, stabbed in the heart and rushed to the hospital, and was now in intensive care with virtually no prospect for survival.

When the word spread among the church staff, they gathered spontaneously to pray.

Standing around the altar, each person prayed.

My friend told me that he and the others offered sincere prayers, but mostly polite and mild petitions, prayers that spoke of comfort and hope and changed hearts, but prayers that had already faced the hard facts of almost certain death.

Then the custodian prayed.

My friend reported that it was the most athletic prayer he had ever witnessed.

The custodian *wrestled* with God, *shouted* at God, *anguished* with God.

His finger jabbed the air and his body shook.

"You've *got* to save him!

You just can't *let him die!*" he practically screamed at God.

"You've done it many times, Lord!

You've done it for others, you've done it for me, now I am begging you to *do it again!*

Do it for *him!*

Save him, Lord!"

"It was as if he grabbed God by the lapels and refused to turn God loose until God came with healing wings," my friend said.

"When we heard that prayer, we just knew that God would indeed come to heal.

In the face of that desperate cry for help, God would have been ashamed not to save the man's life."

And so it happened."

Tom Long

If your belief is all in your head, keep believing.

If your belief pours through every cell in your body, keep believing.

If your belief is riddled with doubt, keep believing.

And as you believe, call out with the psalmist:

Let all those whom the LORD has redeemed proclaim
that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.

He gathered them out of the lands;
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

Some were fools and took to rebellious ways;
they were afflicted because of their sins.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

Give thanks to the LORD for his mercy
and the wonders he does for his children.

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