

What a Difference a Word Makes

When I was practicing law, there was a time I represented a well-known couple who the federal government was investigating.

The investigation had to do with this couple making a series of bank deposits of less than \$10,000 in cash, which, potentially, is a crime if the government thinks you're trying to avoid reporting requirements.

You see, deposits of more than \$10,000 in cash means you have to fill out a government form and give some information about yourself and the money.

Under \$10,000, no form.

What this case boiled down to was whether the wife told the bank teller that the money was "for" her wedding or whether it was "from" her wedding.

The way the case had developed, if the money was "for" the wedding, charges would be brought.

If the money was "from" the wedding, the case would go away.

A single word, "for" or "from," meant the difference between an indictment and possible jail time or the whole ugly mess just disappearing.

I was thinking of that case this week as I read Paul's letter to the Romans.

We get Paul's letters in English, which is sensible because aside from my friend Stuart Ching, I don't know anyone else here who's fluent in Greek.

But because we get Paul's letter in something other than the original language, sometimes one mistranslated word can make all the difference in what he has to say.

We've all seen and heard such things in other settings.

Travel abroad and you're likely to come home with a whole slew of amusing signs and menus posted by folks whose English almost gets there, but not quite.

Like the Cocktail lounge in Norway that says: LADIES ARE REQUESTED NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN IN THE BAR.

Or the doctor in Rome who claims to be a SPECIALIST IN WOMEN AND OTHER DISEASES.

Not to be outdone by the Acapulco hotel sign that assures all guests that THE MANAGER HAS PERSONALLY PASSED ALL THE WATER SERVED HERE.

Yes, a single word can make all the difference.

And so it is today.

While our reading has Paul preaching about “belief IN Christ;” that phrase is better translated (from the Greek) as the “belief OF Christ” or, even closer to the original meaning, the “FAITH OF Christ.”

Now you may be thinking, there’s the lawyer in him, just nitpicking away!

And I will protest: Not So!

In fact, this one word change, from “in” to “of” may be responsible for more harm to the Christian message, more division among those who claim Jesus as Lord, more animosity from those who do not have faith, than any other single word in history.

Stay with me on this.

To believe “in” Jesus; to have faith “in” Jesus focuses on the person doing the believing: on you and me and every single individual who claims to be a believer.

If that’s where we’re looking for our definition of faith: no wonder we have arrived at a time where belief is often nothing more than a subjective feeling that lines up just right with each person’s own prejudices and each person’s own feelings and their own particular circumstances.

What we’re left with is not belief or faith in the one true God revealed in Jesus, but faith and belief in millions of gods: yours, mines and everyone else’s.

Among our Evangelical friends, this highly personal view of faith is the cornerstone.

Your acceptance of Christ as your personal savior, however you might personally conceive that Christ, is all you need to be a Christian, many of them say.

And so we have purported Christians, Glenn Beck comes to mind, who actually insist, with a straight face, that social justice has nothing to do with Christianity: social justice, he says, is evil.

We have Christians on the right who insist that our faith is an entirely personal affair that has no bearing on the poor and exploited of the world; and we have those on the left who engage in all kinds of mindless psycho-babble of the “I’m Okay -- You’re Okay” variety -- and pass that off as the gospel message.

When you think about it, none of this is surprising -- because if belief IN Jesus is the touchstone -- who's to say **your** belief is any more or less authentic than **mine**?

But if our faith is a wholly subjective affair, then what's the point of passing it on?

What's the point of saying anything about it, since we may only offend or embarrass?

So we say: "Each to their own!" and "Live and let live!" as we shuffle down the road of our lives.....

Which gets us back to what Paul actually said, in Greek, all those years ago.

Just like the Norwegian bar ought to have advised women not to BRING children into the bar (rather than not HAVING them there); just as the Acapulco manager might better have INSPECTED rather than PASSED all the water we are drinking at his hotel, just so, a right reading of Paul brings us miles closer to *how we are invited to the table of belief*, to the table of faith.

It is the "belief of," or better, the "faith of" Jesus that is the saving truth.

Remember the gospel story when Jesus is teaching in a crowded house?

People are packed to the rafters and spilling out onto the street.

If you're not already inside, you're not getting in.

Except, here comes four guys walking up the street, desperate to get their paralyzed buddy in front of Jesus, so desperate that they grab their friend, hoist him and themselves up onto the roof, tear a hole in the roof, and lower their friend with ropes tied to his mat, and plop him down right in front of Jesus.

Jesus looks at the man and says: "Friend, because of **their** faith, your sins are forgiven."

In that encounter, Jesus is saying plainly what Paul today is saying plainly, if only we get the Greek right.

It is the faith **of Jesus** that saves us; **his** faith that takes him from eternity into the womb of an unwed teen, onto the dusty streets of a backwards nation, into the lives of ordinary folks, like you and me, teaching us what God wants us to do, and then living it, living it right to the end, forgiving his enemies and reconciling the whole world – while wearing a crown made of thorns – as he is nailed to his throne, the cross.

By *that faith, by his faith*, we are saved; not by our own puny faith, *but by the faith OF Jesus, we are saved!*

One theologian speaks of the last temptation and the second to last temptation facing modern Christians.

The second to last temptation is to insist that faith IN Jesus trumps the faith OF Jesus.

That insistence takes what is objective and difficult and true (namely, the faith OF Jesus) and subordinates it to that which is subjective and easy and timid (namely, our faith IN Jesus): all in the name of Christianity.

As we saw in today's gospel, the most seductive temptations aren't about money or sex or greed.

The most seductive temptations have us doing the devil's work when we all along think we're doing the work of God.

The devil quotes scripture with Jesus nose-to-nose, verse for verse.

It is not a new problem.

In the powerful story by Dostoevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor*, the problem of doing the devil's work while holding it out as God's work is laid bare for all to see.

In the story, Jesus is once more among us, in the flesh, in Spain, during the Inquisition, when the church tortured and killed its opponents.

"He comes softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone recognizes him.

The people are irresistibly drawn to him, they surround him, they flock about him, follow him. "

"An old man in the crowd, blind from childhood, cries out: "O Lord, heal me and I will see you!"

And, as it were, scales fall from his eyes and the blind man sees him.

The crowd weeps and kisses the earth under his feet.

Children throw flowers before him, sing and cry 'Hosanna!' 'It is he!' 'It is he!'"

"He stops at the steps of the Cathedral, at the moment when weeping mourners are bringing in a little, open, white casket.

In it lies a child of seven, the only daughter of a prominent citizen.

The dead child lies hidden in flowers.

'He will raise your child,' the crowd shouts to the weeping mother."

"The priest, coming to meet the coffin, looks perplexed, and frowns, but the mother of the dead child throws herself at his feet with a wail.

'If it is you, raise my child!' she cries, holding out her hands to him."

"The procession halts, the coffin is laid on the steps at his feet.

He looks with compassion, and his lips once more softly pronounce: 'Little girl, arise!'

And the child arises.

The little girl sits up in her coffin, looks round, smiling with wide open, wondering eyes, holding the bunch of white roses they had put into her hands."

"At that moment, the Grand Inquisitor passes by.

He sees it all.

The coffin.

The shouts.

The little girl getting up.

And Jesus is arrested.

Taken to jail.

Where the Grand Inquisitor himself demands: 'Why have you come to trouble us?'

'Tomorrow you will be burned at the stake as the worst of the heretics!'"

"The Grand Inquisitor continues:

'You give people freedom, but all they really want is bread.

All they really want is security.

They want to worship you, not follow you.'"

“At the end, he saw that the prisoner had listened intently all the time, looking gently in his face.

The old man longed for him to say something, however bitter and terrible.

But he approached the old man in silence, and softly kissed him on his bloodless, aged lips.

That was all his answer.

The old man shuddered.

His lips moved.

He went to the door, opened it, and said to him, ‘Go, and come no more ... come not at all, never, never!’”

“The prisoner went away.”

Such is the way that belief IN Jesus can and is twisted and mangled in ways that the faith OF Jesus can never be.

We have seen over countless bloody centuries, in our pitiful history of division among those claiming Christ, the religious wars and agonies that follow belief IN Christ, because belief IN Christ is all about us: whereas the “faith OF Christ” is all about God.

As the Grand Inquisitor knew, we care mostly about bread; precisely why we need the faith of the One who can stare Satan in the face and declare:

“People don’t live by bread alone.”

That is the second to last temptation.

The last temptation, for we moderns, is to conclude that since belief in God is so totally individual, so totally private, that we can never and ought never speak about Jesus: that we can never and ought never spread the good news.

Why offend the next fellow who may believe, but believe differently than I?

Why talk about my personal faith with that self-proclaimed atheist when his atheism is as individual and personal as my belief?

(By the way, my 12 year-old reports that half of her 7th grade classmates identify themselves as atheists).

Today, we move in communities that are not much different from the communities Paul moved in, and he wondered, out loud, as he saw so many searching, yet still lost:

“[H]ow can people call for help if they don’t know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven’t heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it?” Rom 10:14.

We, my friends, stand in the long line of those who have been sent to do it!

Look to the faith of Jesus, the faith that never waivers, that always seeks to know -- and then to do -- the Father’s will, the faith that trusts from nose to toes that God *is*, that God is faithful, that God has already brought us home.

If you look to the faith OF Jesus, you will find a freedom beyond all imagining, a joy that is immovable, and a peace that passes all understanding.

May it be so.

+amen