

Faith and/or Belief

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Matthew 17:14-21; John 3:6

Church member, Warren Brisbin asked, “What is meant by faith?” He added, Faith would initially seem to indicate that a person believes....” Faith and belief...how are they related? Are they related?

I once heard faith and belief described like this. Someone might ask you if you believe a man can push a wheelbarrow across the Grand Canyon on a tightwire strung from rim to rim. Well, it sounds pretty unlikely, hard to imagine how such a wire could ever be rigged up and who would attempt such a thing, but yes, it may be possible, yes, you might believe someone could do that. Ah, but if you have faith, you will hop into that wheelbarrow and let him push you across.

Belief and faith...how are they related? There are many people today, many in this congregation, who simply are no longer sure that they can believe certain doctrines, certain teachings of traditional Christianity. But does this mean they can no longer have faith? She was a university student, one of the only young and single members of a small, rural Lutheran church. “I love this congregation,” she said. “These people have become my family.” But then she paused and almost whispered, “But I don’t know what to say when my classmates ask me what I believe. Whenever I say, ‘I believe in Christianity’ they look at me as if I’m crazy. Besides, I don’t even know if I believe in Christianity or Lutheran doctrine or anything like that. I just experience how to love God and how God loves me through these people, by learning how to quilt and singing these hymns. I don’t know what to call it, but it is less about believing and more about living. Does that still count as being Christian?” Well, does it?

Can we still equate faith with belief? Reflecting on this, Diana Butler Bass, a leading thinker and commentator on trends in American religion, says, “Being faithful once meant that one accepted certain ideas about God and Jesus, especially as articulated in the creeds. Denominations specified what adherents must believe about sacraments, salvation and authority. Confirmation in faith entailed memorization and recitation of doctrine or facts about the Bible. Some groups even insisted that true Christians must further believe particular ideas about drinking, women, science, the end times or politics. Indeed, as they reacted to unbelief, certain Christians asked for more belief about increasingly unbelievable things.” (yes, you can find books insisting that humans and dinosaurs lived together on the earth...less than 6000 years ago! Such thinking sees the Flintstones, not as a cartoon, but as a documentary.) What do you think? Has Christianity become little more than believing that a certain set of statements are true?

I want to be careful here. I don’t want to make it sound like beliefs don’t matter. UCC pastor, Lillian Daniel, tells about her mother planning a fancy garden party. She wanted flowers for the party, but no flowers were growing in the yard at that time of year. So she went to a florist, bought bunches of cut daffodils, then put them in the ground and tied them to chopsticks so that they would remain standing for the party. But with no bulb underneath to support them, even with the chopsticks, they soon withered. It is tempting to do something similar to that when it comes to our religious faith – to make our own religious bouquet – pick and choose ideas that sound good to us. Trouble is, it can produce a faith that looks an awful lot like me and my values and opinions...kind of a religious narcissism where I worship my every opinion and thought, without much underneath to support it. I have some serious reservations about self-made religion. And bad beliefs can become a perversion of faith, producing intolerance, cruelty, injustice, violence, persecution, and sometimes a whole lot of silliness. So you are not going to hear me say that beliefs are unimportant.

And yet, isn’t there something more about faith than simply beliefs, something involving a much deeper movement of the heart and soul? I mean, a faith that is simply a set of statements we believe are true would seem to have very little transforming power.

Faith, of course, comes from a word meaning fidelity. Think of what faithfulness, fidelity, means in human relationships. Though sometimes narrowly restricted to sexual behavior, it really has a far more expansive meaning of commitment, loyalty, allegiance and attentiveness to the relationship. The same would apply to our relationship with God – commitment, loyalty, allegiance and attentiveness to that relationship. And it means a deep trust in God.

Henry Ward Beecher, perhaps the most influential preacher of the Civil War period, wrote of a childhood that we would likely call deprived. The family was often mired in poverty, close to starvation, with too few prospects. Beecher recalled a particularly difficult and tense

time when he overheard his parents having a discussion. His mother was deeply distressed about their seemingly hopeless situation. But then he heard his father say, "My dear, I have trusted God now for forty years and have never regretted that trust. I am not, however fearsome the future, going to begin to distrust God now."

Beecher, reflecting on that memory, wrote, "My father taught me the catechism and read from the Bible, but none of that ever became the truth for me my father became that night...I could never forget that single scene. Here was the truth of faith...not something to believe, but someone in whom is seen real trust of God. That taught me to trust."

Faith, not so much beliefs and information about God as an experience of God, a relationship with God, a trust of God. So perhaps the question facing the church is not how do we give people more information, but rather, how can we, in our worship life, our life together, our mission in the world, nurture people's experience of God – deepen the human/divine relationship.

Fred Craddock tells a story I've shared before, but I return to it because I believe it speaks to this issue of belief and faith – information or relationship: "I think I was twenty years old when I first read Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. I found his theology – his christology – woefully lacking – more water than wine. I marked the book up, wrote in the margins, raised questions of all kinds. Then one day I read that Schweitzer was going to be in Cleveland to play the dedicatory concert for a new organ in a large church in that city. According to the article, he would remain in the fellowship hall after the concert for conversation and refreshments.

"I was in school in Tennessee at the time, but I bought a bus ticket for Cleveland. All the way up there I worked on my questions for him, wrote down page numbers from his book. I figured if there was conversation after the concert, then there would be room for a question or two and I wanted to be ready.

"I arrived in Cleveland, went to the concert, then rushed into the fellowship hall and waited with my questions in my lap. After a while he came in, shaggy hair, big white mustache, stooped, seventy-five years old. He had played a marvelous concert. You know, he was a master organist, medical doctor, philosopher, biblical scholar, lecturer, and writer. He came in with a cup of tea and stood in front of the group. There I was, so close to him, ready for him. Dr. Schweitzer thanked everybody: 'You've been very warm and hospitable to me. I thank you for it. I wish I could stay longer among you, but I must go back to Africa. I must go back because my people are poor and diseased and hungry and dying, and I have to go. We have a medical station at Lambarene in the Congo. If there is anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus in his or her heart, would you be prompted by that love to go with me and help me?'"

Says Craddock, "I looked down at my questions. They now seemed so absolutely stupid. And I learned again what it means to be a Christian, and had hopes that I could be one someday."

Beliefs are important. Theology is important. I don't want a faith as shallow as a daffodil stuck in the ground with nothing underneath to support it. But perhaps the place to start is with the question, "Do you have the love of Jesus in your heart? Yes, we will get around to your belief system later, but for now, what is the disposition of your heart, how is the Spirit making a difference in your life right now? And how can that relationship be nurtured and deepened?"

According to scholars, such as Diana Butler Bass and Marcus Borg, in the earliest English uses of the word, to believe actually meant to love. What you believed in was what you set your heart upon, what you prized or treasured, held dear or devoted yourself to...again, what you beloved.

And so Jesus, once again thoroughly exasperated with his disciples, cries out, "If only you had faith the size of a mustard seed...you of little faith, if only you had a little faith!" Is he urging them to believe in a set of doctrines or statements about God? I don't think so. I think he is saying, "If only you had more trust in God, a deeper relationship with God, a willingness to give more of your life to God, to be transformed by God, then, yes, you might even be able to move mountains." Do beliefs matter? Yes. And as we journey together, I am happy to talk with you about beliefs. But for today, once again, let's think of faith as a much deeper movement of the heart, of the self, at its deepest level; faith as a relationship, not as much believing as loving, living every day trusting in the God whom our beliefs, finally, can only dimly describe."