

Sermon: "Faith and Belief"

Text: Mark 9:21-24

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Recently I was able to spend the day with one of my very best friends.

She grew up in a conservative Christian home, much like the one I grew up in, though she (and I) long-ago left behind that particular kind of Christian faith.

We both found a home in the Presbyterian Church and rediscovered a way of following Jesus that was more gracious and thoughtful than the one we left behind. And yet... both of us have also continued to ask hard questions about the teachings of the church, statements found in the creeds, beliefs we both have found troubling and confusing.

During our conversation she told me, "I just have realized that I don't BELIEVE this stuff any more. I don't know what the path to God is. For a long time I have shared the same core Christian beliefs as my parents. Now I just don't."

My friend is not alone in this. Many of us have struggled with "not believing that stuff any more."

But what does it mean to "believe?"

Is it to give intellectual assent to a propositional statement?

To hear a pronouncement about God, Jesus, sin, forgiveness, the cross, heaven, hell, the will of God, salvation... whatever... to hear it, think it through, and decide that it is a fact. It is true. We believe?

What is "faith?" Does the sum total of all of those doctrinal statements we have believed in constitute our Faith? We believe x, y, and z. Therefore we have faith. We are Christians?

Today we are going to talk about Faith and Belief in an attempt to figure out what those words actually mean. And what they do not mean.

I'm going to give you a little hint here...

I do *not* think that the Faith or Belief that we read about in Scripture is about giving intellectual assent to propositional statements.

But a lot of people--some of them Baptists-- DO think that is what Christianity is.

Then, when they begin to question, and can no longer believe those *statements*, they walk away from Faith, from the possibility of relational encounter with the living God.

Biblical scholar and Harvard Prof. Wilfred Cantwell Smith says that faith and belief are **not the same thing**.

Cantwell Smith says:

Faith is "an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbour, to the universe." Faith is the capacity to live, see, feel and act in awareness of what is transcendent.

"Belief, on the other hand, is the holding of certain ideas." (*Faith and Belief*, 12)

“Faith is a radically divergent thing from belief. And it has become disastrous to confuse the two. Belief follows after faith, and theology is simply an honest human attempt to conceptualize, in the terms of one’s day, the faith that one has priorly had, the vision that one has seen.” (*Believing-An Historical Perspective*, 79)

A common understanding today, however, is just the opposite.

One has faith once one has “believed,” or agreed on the truth of certain doctrinal statements.

Let’s look briefly at some uses of the terms “faith” and “belief” in the English translation of Mark’s Gospel:

Mark 4: boat, storm, disciples are terrified. Jesus says: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

--Is this a question of correct doctrine? Or is faith some internal characteristic of the disciples? Notice this is not faith “in” something. It is just faith.

Mark 5: Woman with hemorrhage of blood reaches out, touches Jesus, and is healed. Jesus says: “Daughter, your faith has made you well.”

-- Is Jesus praising her intellectually correct beliefs? Again, notice, this is not faith “in” something.

Right after that, Jarius learns his daughter is dead. Jesus says, “Do not fear, only believe.”

--What kind of belief is this? Is mentally affirming a fact the opposite of fear?

Mark 9 (which we heard today): a man asks Jesus to heal his epileptic child, and then says:

“Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”

--What is he saying? What is he asking for?

In his book, “The Heart of Christianity,” Marcus Borg notes that this idea that being a Christian is about believing in certain Christian teachings and that Faith is about Belief is a fairly recent development.

The impact has been to create a Christianity that is about the beliefs in your head. It is a matter of the intellect. A pre-modern Christianity, however, was concerned with the deeper matters of the heart-- with faith as trust, faith as deep commitment or loyalty, and faith as vision.

The idea that Christianity is mostly a head matter came into being as the result of two developments in modern Western Christianity.

First, the Protestant Reformation resulted in different groups of Christians defining themselves by their distinctive doctrines or confessions.

Christian faith became about believing the right things.

This changed the meaning of the word Orthodoxy.

Before this it referred to “correct worship.”

After the Reformation, orthodoxy was about “correct belief.”

The second development was that during the Enlightenment, people began to identify truth with fact – that which could be empirically verified. (To equate all “truth” with “fact” is a pretty significant and not altogether helpful movement.)

This led to a questioning of the factuality/truth of the Bible and Christian teaching. The impact of this was that Christian faith came to be associated with *believing questionable things to be true*.

In other words, faith is about believing something contrary to evidence, contrary to what reasonable people know.

(Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 28-30)

A current example of this might be an insistence on a literal 7-day creation and a “young earth.”

These modern shifts in thinking have brought us to where we are now in terms of understanding Faith and Belief.

In struggling with this over time, my conclusion is this:

If what God cares most about is us believing the right things, if correct beliefs are what save us, we are in a LOT of trouble.

But really, doesn't it seem strange that God would care that much about something as limited and fallible as our intellectual musings? Can't you picture the heavenly scene? God: “Argh! They got that one totally wrong! Again!” Shrug. ZAP! “Hell, hell, hell...you were close, but...no. Hell.”

The crazy thing is, this kind of belief as intellectual assent doesn't necessarily change anything or anyone.

Marcus Borg notes:

“Faith as belief is relatively impotent, relatively powerless. You can believe all the right things and still be in bondage. You can believe all the right things and still be miserable. You can believe all the right things and still be relatively unchanged. Believing a set of claims to be true has very little transforming power.” (THoC, 31)

This makes me think of something the late Bill Fordyce, a University of Washington faculty member who did pioneering work on the psychology of chronic pain, once said.

He said: ‘Information is to behavior change as spaghetti is to a brick’.

Let's take a closer look at that analogy.

Information is to behavior change as spaghetti is to a brick. (Repeatedly throw spaghetti at brick.)

What kind of impact is this pasta having on the brick?

None what-so-ever.

The brick...is still...a brick.

A hammer...now that might change the brick. Spaghetti, not so much.

Bill Fordyce came up with this because he noticed that giving people a lot of very true, very helpful information about how to improve their health did not, in fact, cause them to change their behavior in any way.

In our discussion of faith as intellectual belief the analogy might go like this:

Correct belief is to personal transformation as spaghetti is to a brick.

(Again, repeated throw spaghetti at brick)

On other words, an intellectual acceptance of the “truth” of certain statements of belief does not in any way mean that the holder of those beliefs will be experience spiritual transformation or encounter with God.

*That* kind of transformation requires a different kind of faith.

This different faith is the faith that Jesus is calling his disciples to.

A faith that transforms. A faith that is first and foremost about the orientation of the heart to God. About relationship.

A traditional Christian understanding of faith, for example would be faith as “radical trust in God.” The opposite of faith as trust would be-- not disbelief--but mistrust, anxiety or worry.

Jesus talks about this quite a bit.

“Don’t worry, don’t be anxious. Oh you of little faith.”

Maybe this was the kind of faith he was talking about on the boat in the storm.

What kind of transformation happens in our lives when we LIVE INTO a life of faith as radical trust? What would life look like if all the energy we spend worrying was directed in more fruitful ways because we simply trusted in God?

Not trusted a set of statements about God. Trusted IN GOD.

Trust is relational, it is a way of life.

A way of relatedness to God that is transformative.

Another traditional understanding is faith as loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness.

This kind of faith involves a “radical centering” on God, a deep commitment of the innermost self, a giving of one’s heart to God.

Again, this is intensely relational.

The opposite of this kind of faith is infidelity, unfaithfulness, idolatry.

Unfaithfulness means giving our ultimate allegiance to anyone but God. Faithfulness means attending with love and care to our relationship with God, cherishing and tending it as we would any other relationship.

It also means loving the things God loves.

Can you see (and feel) the difference?

Now that we have pried Faith away from referring exclusively to intellectual belief, we can turn to what I think is the most exciting part: recovering the traditional meaning of the term “Believe.”

Wilard Cantwell Smith was a pioneer in this area, and speaker and author Diana Butler Bass discussed Smith’s thinking when she was here in September.

The Enlightenment and Reformation played a part in our confusion over Faith and Belief. But a big part of the problem is that, unlike Greek and Hebrew, English does not have a verb that is equivalent to the concept of “faith.”

In Greek, *pistis* becomes *pisteuo*. The root *pist* stays the same.

In English, we can speak of a noun “faith” but we don’t speak of a verb “to faith.” “Faithing” is not a word.

So, the first English translations used the verb “to believe” as a substitute.

It was a good solution at the time, because “to believe” carried a similar range of meanings to “faithing.”

However, as we know, language changes.

In English, “believe” used to mean something much different than it does now. Literally, and originally, “To believe” meant “to hold dear,” “to love.”

The German equivalent “belieben” still means that today.

“Lieben is the verb “to love”

(WCS, *Faith and Belief*, 105)

So a more accurate word today might be not “believe” but “belove.”  
Faith, therefore, is about *beloving* God. (Diana Butler Bass and Marcus Borg)  
About living in trust, fidelity, and devotion to God.

Similarly, “credo,” the Latin for “creed,” is typically translated “I believe,” which is understood to moderns as intellectual assent.  
Again, this is not accurate.

The Latin roots of credo mean “I give my heart to.”  
The heart is understood as the deepest level of the self.  
So “credo” too carries the idea of loving God, and also might be translated as  
“I commit my loyalty to” or “I commit my allegiance to.” (WCS, Borg, DBB)

Note that the object of faith, belief, creed is ALWAYS a person: God.  
Belief is not giving one’s heart to ideas about God.

For Christians who are guided by the Creeds (and this includes much of the worldwide Christian community), this shift in understanding can be liberating. Because it means faith is a prayer.

Listen to the difference when we approach the Apostles’ Creed, for example:

I belove God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,  
And I give my whole heart to Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;  
I put my trust in Jesus, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,  
I surrender my allegiance to the One who was crucified, dead and buried....  
All my life I place in the service of the Holy Ghost,  
And All my love I give to the holy catholic church and the communion of saints.  
I trust in my God for the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Personally, I have found this reclaiming of the meanings of “believe” and “creed” to be incredibly liberating. It means that I can hold doubts about fact and doctrine without compromising my deep loving of God. It means that I can let go of any fear about “correct” doctrine and trust completely in the God who is beyond words or human descriptions.

I find myself going through Scripture, trying out these different ways of understanding faith and belief.

And I return to say with the father in Mark’s Gospel:  
“I belove. Help my lack of love.”

May God lead you into greater love, trust and devotion; into deeper faith and believing.  
Amen.