

Lent 4B 2015 Sermon

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16)

It is, Martin Luther said, "the Gospel in a nutshell". And it can be both the most uplifting, inspiring passage in the world (God loves us so much that he gave his own Son!) AND it is the most frightening passage in the world (what happens to all those who do **not** believe in Jesus, or what if I don't believe well enough or right enough?)

Which is why I think it so crucial that we hear this most famous verse in the New Testament correctly. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

The problem comes with the words "believe in", for it is all too easy to understand "believing in Jesus" as something **we do** – which only puts our ego in control, where we love to be. We simply "accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior", and we've earned eternal life.

Now, those of you who have listened to me over the years (even if only occasionally) know that the Greek word often translated as "believe in" is actually the verb form of the word for "faith." The problem is that in English, "faith" **has** no verb form. We do not "faith" God or "faith in" God. So Bible translators have to decide how to translate a verb which has no English equivalent. Most of the time it is translated "believe in". But this is problematic, for to "believe in Christ" (in the sense of our Gospel passage) does not mean to hold certain beliefs about Christ. other times it is translated "trust". I think the latter – trust – is a far better translation for a verb form of "faith".

Let me give an example. There are some people who say that they "believe in" Jesus or in the Bible who also think that homosexuality is "an abomination", and thus believe that actions taken against gays – such as locking them up, or having them castrated, or even (in some parts of Africa) putting them to death is consistent with belief in Christ. But such attitudes and actions are clearly opposite of the attitude and actions of Jesus. That is one reason I think that a better translation of the Greek verb "to faith" is "trust". *Trusting* in Jesus, surrendering to the Spirit of Christ and allowing that spirit to flood your heart, soul, and mind, would **never** lead to such actions. The mind of Christ, the heart of Christ, the will of Christ seeks the one lost sheep out of 100, refuses to condemn the woman caught in adultery, feeds his body and blood to the disciple he knows will betray him, and forgives Peter who denied him three times. Trusting in Christ, living in Christ, is sharing in, living **within** the life of the risen Christ, the life-flow of the Holy Trinity.

Episcopal monk David Vryhof wrestles with this all-too-common problem of confusing faith with belief. He writes, “Christians, in the minds of most people, are people who ‘believe’ certain statements or propositions about God, about Jesus, about the Bible, about the human condition, and so on.

“I would say that this notion of Christian faith as giving mental assent to a set of beliefs is the prevalent understanding today for Christians and non-Christians alike.

“For most people, Christian faith means believing certain things to be true: believing, for example, that there is a God, that the Bible is the revelation of God, and that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died for our sins. Certain Christian groups have their *own* criteria for believing. To be considered authentically Christian in some groups, members may be expected to believe in creationism rather than evolution, or to believe that Christians will be raptured from the earth before Christ comes to destroy the whole world, or to believe that speaking in tongues is the primary indicator of the Spirit’s presence in our lives.

“What one believes becomes the chief criteria by which one is recognized as a Christian or not. This kind of thinking makes Christianity a religion of the mind, rather than of the heart. Salvation depends on what one thinks or believes.

“What we believe is no doubt important – communities are formed on the basis of similar values and beliefs – but this kind of believing – asserting that various statements about God or Jesus or the Bible or the world are true – does not accurately reflect the fullness of what Christian faith is all about. The emphasis on this kind of believing is a modern development. The understanding of faith expressed in the Bible and in the tradition of the Church is much broader and deeper.

“Christian faith has more to do with the heart than with the head. [And by “heart” Br. David is not referring to the seat of human emotions but rather, as the ancient Wisdom teachers understood, the heart as the organ of alignment with spiritual reality.] Again, this is not to deny the importance of right thinking, of theological study, or of sound scholarship, but to recognize that Christian faith deals not just with the mind, but with the deepest levels of the self. Christian faith operates at a level below our thinking, feeling, and willing; it engages our hearts.”
(www.ssje.org)

Presbyterian pastor and consummate wordsmith Frederick Buechner notes that “some think of a Christian as one who necessarily believes certain things. That Jesus was the son of God, say. Or that Mary was a virgin. Or that the Pope is infallible. Or that all other religions are all wrong.

“Some think of a Christian as one who necessarily **does** certain things. Such as going to church. Getting baptized. Giving up liquor and tobacco. Reading the Bible. Doing a good deed a day.

“Some think of a Christian as just a Nice Guy.

“Jesus said, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me’ (John 14:6). He didn't say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. He said that **he** was. He didn't say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could ‘come to the Father.’ He said that it was only by him — by living, participating in, being caught up by, the... life that he embodied...

“Thus it is possible,” Buechner continues, “to be on Christ's way and with his mark upon you without ever having heard of Christ, and for that reason to be on your way to God though maybe you don't even believe in God.” (Originally published in *Wishful Thinking*, quoted from email)

“Believing God [trusting, uniting one's life with God] is... less a position than a journey,” Buechner continues, “less a realization than a relationship. It doesn't leave you cold like believing the world is round. It stirs your blood like believing the world is a miracle. It affects who you are and what you do with your life like believing your house is on fire or somebody loves you. We believe *in* God when for one reason or another we *choose* to do so. We *believe* God when somehow we run into God in a way that by and large leaves us no choice to do otherwise.

“When Jesus says that whoever believes ‘into’ him shall never die, he does not mean that to be willing to sign your name to the Nicene Creed guarantees eternal life. Eternal life is not the result of believing *in*. It is the *experience* of believing.” (Originally published in *Whistling in the Dark*, quoted from email)

Eternal life is not the result of believing *in*. It is the *experience* of believing. The experience of trusting god and living within the life of God in this world. It is *participating* in the life of the risen Christ, not making mental assent to some statement *about* Christ – that he was born of a virgin, or he died for our sins. “It is no longer I who live,” St. Paul wrote, “but Christ lives in me.” Christ may have indeed died for the forgiveness of sins, but salvation doesn't come from *believing* that statement. Rather, it comes through living one's life *within* that forgiveness, within the life of the Risen Christ who, as Paul said, lives *in* us and through us.

“In Christ, in Christ, in Christ” – it is Paul's favorite expression. And it is what we enact in our Eucharist. It is not simply that we believe that the wafer and the wine is the body and blood of Christ, but rather that we take that life of Christ into ourselves. “That he may live in us, and we in him,” we pray in our Eucharistic Prayer.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that all who join their life to his already have eternal life.

AMEN