

Proper 24C 21 Pentecost 17 October 2010 Bob Partlow

It is going to take me a while to get there but the question that I want to explore this morning is the difference between faith and belief....if there is one. One of the miracles of creation that makes us uniquely human is our ability to use languages and symbols (which is what words are). If I say a word like “watermelon”, immediately the symbol of a watermelon appears in your head. You can’t prevent it. But the words do not travel through a vacuum, they travel through our culture and are shaped and given particular meanings by our experiences. An African-American hearing me say “watermelon” may remember when that word sometimes implied a racial stereotype and have a different reaction to what I say.

I also love the story of Beethoven’s last symphony, the 9<sup>th</sup> which contains what we call the wonderful “Ode to Joy”. Beethoven was totally and profoundly deaf when he composed it in 1824. He heard the music in his head, wrote the notes, the symbols, and now 186 years later, a symphony orchestra plays the 9<sup>th</sup> and I actually hear what Beethoven created but only heard in his head. How does that happen?

The use of language and symbols is clearly a major factor in what makes us human....but it is not perfect. In some ways our use of languages is mysterious. Eskimos I am told have numerous words to describe what we just call “snow”. Some cultures have words for concepts that do not exist in other cultures. Apparently one of the major reasons there was so much difficulty in establishing unity of doctrine in the early church was that the Western Church (Rome) communicated in Latin while the Eastern Church (Constantinople) communicated in Greek. And they were trying to come to agreement on very abstract concepts; such the Trinity of God! In the Epistle, Timothy says that all scripture is “inspired by God”...an equally valid translation is the all scripture is “God breathed”. But, with the effects of culture and the limitations of words, can we ever say that our particular understanding of the words of scripture are pure, absolute and right? That is fundamentalism. So the use of language and words is a major factor that makes us human....but words are not absolute. One of the reasons we have to have creeds is because there are no words that can fully describe a God who is three in one and one in three or how Jesus could be both fully human and fully divine. Our creeds do not define or explain the Trinity or Incarnation, both of

which are mysteries; the creeds maintain the mystery of them both and do not explain them.

I have personally come to the point of believing that we can only parse words so far. Words cannot convey absolute meaning because absolutes belong only to God. I believe that the limits of language reflect the mystery that stands between us, the created, and God the creator. Celts speak of “thin places” where the veil between heaven and earth becomes very thin....but the veil never goes away completely. The limitations of language are that veil. It is because of this limitation that Paul wrote of how we see through a glass darkly.

When we invest words with too much meaning and power we create insolvable conflicts. Are we saved by faith or by works? What is the difference between “belief” and “faith”? Are there propositions that I cannot say I believe but in faith can know are true? At the completion of the sermon, we usually invite you to stand and affirm your faith in the words of the Nicene Creed.....but the Creed begins with the words “We believe in one God...”. So are we making a statement of faith or belief?

There has been an excellent three part series on Religion in America on Public TV. One segment was on slavery and the civil war and how different understandings of scripture had hardened people to the point where they were willing to engage in such terrible carnage. Abraham Lincoln was not what you would call a fervent Christian for his time....I suspect that many both then and now would deny that Lincoln was a “believer”. But I would describe his agonizing decision to take actions that would lead to war as fitting Jesus’ parable about being persistent in prayer. I would classify Lincoln’s long tortured anguish as prayer which led him to be convinced that slavery was an evil that must be ended and he acted on that conclusion. Could it be said that Lincoln was not a believer but that he was faithful? Which does God call us to be?

Later in this service we will pray for people to be healed....is prayer an act of belief or faith? To me it is an act of faith...just as was Lincoln’s anguished wrestling.

So, what is the difference between “faith” and “belief”? One of my many short comings is that I tend to be taken captive and held hostage by the last thoughtful book that I have read. This sermon largely springs from the last such book ***The Future of Faith*** by Harvard theologian Harvey Cox. He argues that

Christianity went astray when an early community of followers of Jesus way of life, who were led by the Spirit, became main-stream and morphed into “The Church”, dominated by clergy, doctrine, and creeds. With this mutation “what” you believed became more important than whose way you followed. In technical terms, *orthodoxy* trumped *orthopraxis*. Cox says that “belief” was given preference over “Faith” and the church has declined ever since.

Is it Faith or Belief that matters? Again we parse the words too finely, we run into the limitations of language. In reality faith and belief are overlapping concepts with different meanings in different situations. If I use doctrines and creeds to exclude people, then Cox is right. If I deny God’s people call to serve because they are not clergy, then Cox is again right. If I deny the legitimacy of Unitarian Universalists because they are not Trinitarian or Baptists because they do not believe in sacraments or bishops then I have allowed belief to trump faith. But if my faith is just some sort of free floating “spirituality” that exists in some private place where I alone encounter God...what good is it?

When Jesus poses the question of when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth, he is really asking if he will find belief that has turned into action. Faith is belief in action. The Protestant Reformation was sparked by Luther believing that Rome preached that salvation came by works while Luther held that salvation came by faith through grace. I think Jesus would have agreed with the writer of the Epistle of James that “faith without works is dead”. Consider the never ending conflict over abortion rights. I am myself conflicted. But also consider that in 3rd world countries a baby dies every 10 seconds just for lack of clean water and simple inexpensive medicines....probably 600 babies died during this sermon. Consider also that in terms of a % of GDP the US is tied with Greece 24<sup>th</sup> place at 0.16%...although we lead in terms of total dollars.

Both faith that is acted upon and belief are needed....”both and” not “either or”.....how very Anglican. I pray the Son of man finds both when he comes.