

Gospel Reading: John 3:14-21

word count 2,264

I think that we may be hearing this passage today, perhaps even in this room, with very different ears. We have different ways of being Christian, a difference that has kept widening since the days of the Reformation, to where today there are many expressions of Christianity.

This week at the church, I found myself needing to roll out my briefest nutshell descriptions of how people look at Christianity, and it became clear to me that we are now a more diverse body theologically than we were, and it is time to look at this together.

Briefly, there are three ways people understand Christianity: the exclusive, (meaning you are “saved” only through a profession of belief in Christ); the inclusive, (meaning that we recognize that so many people from a diversity of backgrounds lead “Christian” lives, and may therefore be just as loved by Creation); and the pluralistic, (we are all on diverse faith paths that move in different ways up the same mountain).

If your belief in Jesus is about finding the only way to salvation, then for you, belief is a “noun.” It is something you profess. If you believe that Jesus taught us a new way, into which all may come, then your believing is a “verb.” It is the ongoing action of following the one who calls you to a better way. Instead of saying what you need to say for personal gain, you move into finding ways of putting faith into action in the wider community.

So, I would like to do another check-in to see where we come from before we talk about John 3:16. I did this about two-and-a-half years ago, and I would like to see how we have changed. Let’s have a show of hands, unless of course, you don’t feel comfortable participating.

How many of you come from a non-Christian or un-churched background? We’ll include “new-to-church,” New-Thought, Unity, Religious Science, Unitarian... and others you might name. (*Maybe 5%*)

How many of you come from this church’s denominational heritage? (*about 15%*) Keep your hands up—let’s add something. How many of you come from traditional Mainline Protestant backgrounds? ELCA Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, and American Baptist? (*Just over half—about 55% total*)

Quaker? Christian Scientist? (*a few hands*)

Now, how many of you come from a Catholic background? (*roughly 20%*)

How many of you came from a conservative Protestant background, such as Evangelical, Pentecostal, Assemblies of God, Calvary Chapel, Southern Baptist, Missouri Synod Lutheran, Nazarene, Seventh Day Adventist, Jehovah’s Witness? (*roughly 20%*)

And Mormon? Finally, did anyone come from a church that called itself fundamentalist? (*a few hands*)

Look at where the hands went up and how many there were as I went through the list.

If you are over on this side of the way that Christianity is expressed, (theological right) you were taught that Jesus is an instrument of salvation. “Belief,” is a noun. It is something you profess for personal salvation.

If you are over on this side, (theological left) “Believing” is a verb—it is something you do by following Jesus, who is a revelation of a new way.

In this room, we are a collection of people who understand our faith in different ways that depend on how we grew up. The Evangelical, the Pentecostal, and the Southern Baptist come here having learned that there is salvation only through Jesus Christ. The Catholic comes with an inclusive understanding of God, yet where Christianity in the Catholic faith, is at the center. I

suspect that a majority of “Mainliners” come here with an inclusive or even a pluralistic understanding of God, where we are all walking up the same mountain but on different paths of faith according to the religious expression we have been given.

You can be sure that when we heard this passage from John today, that it was being heard with different ears.

The famous verse from this passage is John 3:16. It is so familiar that the verse citation alone was written on a card and held up at football games by the man with the rainbow wig, or at any other public venue by anyone at all. It is referred to as “The Gospel in a nutshell.”

It was an easy thing for me to memorize as a child, and it seemed to sum it up. “For God so loved the world...” But then, I began to grow close to people of other faiths, or no faith at all. Was God’s love only for me, and for people like me? Then you discover that some of those who share the row in which you are sitting, come with their own doubts. How does John 3:16 sound to people coming to terms with faith, when doubt and belief live side by side within like inseparable twins?

This has nothing to do with being a part of a progressive church. There was a study done not long ago that showed a higher level of doubt in fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches. Why? People with a high level of doubt often choose to worship in a place where all the people around them at least *appear* to believe. There is no discussion of shades of gray, and therefore they believe, at least for a while, because they are *immersed* in an atmosphere of belief.

All of this begs the question of what the writers of the New Testament meant when they wrote about how important it was to believe in Jesus. Are we meant to believe in a set of statements about Jesus? Is belief a noun? Or, were the Gospel writers and other early followers of Jesus more concerned about “believing,” that is; the verb form of the word that called for an action—to be followers of a new way, rather than people who could profess a “saving certitude?”

John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that all who believe in him might not perish, but have eternal life.” This has become a common test of faith. What was happening at the time this was written?

The Rev. Richard Smith, of our sister UCC in Tucson, says this: “One is to point to the political ramifications of making that affirmation. At the time (the community of) John was writing, the Emperor was calling himself the ‘Son of God.’ Therefore, to affirm that Jesus was the son of God was to say the emperor is not! It is very similar to the earliest Christian creed, ‘Jesus is Lord.’ If Jesus is Lord, and not Caesar; If Jesus is the son of God, and not Caesar - then it is not just a theological statement, but also a political one, and a very daring, dangerous, and subversive one at that! Many of the faithful died for making just such a profession! To affirm that Jesus is the Son of God today might not seem to have quite the same implications, when hardly any earthly authority claims that for themselves, but it can still be a dangerous thing to really live out your faith in loyalty to God first and a government second.”¹

The Rev. Dr. Wally Fletcher is a pastoral counselor in Pennsylvania. In the latest issue of *Lectionary Homiletics*,² he talks about how believing in Jesus is not so much about agreeing with every line in the Nicene Creed or the literal truth of every verse the Bible says about him. It is less about *thinking, feeling and saying* the right things and more about *loving and doing* the right things—*often in spite of doubt*. Not belief as a noun—but believing as a verb.

I will post a link with this sermon to a video of Marcus Borg speaking on this passage. Paraphrasing him a little, he says that the way this verse is commonly understood is that the way you get to heaven, and eternal life, is by believing in Jesus, and in particular, that Jesus died for the sins of the world. However, in John’s Gospel, the verse means something quite different.

He takes it apart: “For God so loved the World.” Notice it doesn’t say, “For God so loved Christians,” or, the church, or some professing elect. It says, “For God so loved the WORLD.”

“That he gave his only beloved son.” In John’s Gospel, this does not refer to Jesus dying on the cross. This is a statement about incarnation, not the cross. God takes on a human experience.

“Whosoever believes in him.” This does not mean to believe a set of statements about him, but the pre-modern sense of the word “belief” is to commit your heart to, and give yourself to, following your belief.

“Eternal life.” Eternal life in John’s gospel does not mean life after death. It means the “life of the age to come,” which is a Jewish notion. And for John’s gospel, the life of the age to come is already here. As John 17:3 puts it, “For this is eternal life (present tense) to know God. For John, knowing God in the present is already to participate in eternal life. (*my hasty transcription from the video*)³

If we sometimes think that we are the ones who do not appear to have the kind of faith we see in others, then listen to how Wally Fletcher sums up the life and work of a nun whose personal writings about doubt are summed up in the book, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light - The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*.⁴

Teresa decided she was called to be a missionary when she was very young, and went off to teach in Calcutta for many years, with a community of Irish nuns.

(Fletcher:) “This school included the cities’ relatively well off, and Theresa grew restless from looking through windows at the abject poverty of the slums. So at age 36 on her way to a retreat center to recover from a lung ailment she got a new calling: ‘I heard the call to give up all and follow him (Jesus) into the slums—to serve Him in the poorest of the poor...I knew it was His will and that I had to follow Him.’⁵ Later, this calling was confirmed during a mystical experience in which she heard the voice of Jesus pleading, ‘Come, come, carry me into the holes of the poor. Come be My light.’⁶

“After years of trying to overcome the doubts of her superiors she founded the Missionaries of Charity in 1950. What began as a community of 12 members caring for the sick and dying in the slums of Calcutta ‘has grown to more than 4,000 nuns running orphanages, AIDS hospices and other charity centers worldwide.’⁷

“In 1979, she won the Noble Peace Prize, accepting it on behalf of the ‘unwanted, unloved and uncared for.’ The following year she was invited to speak at the Synod of Bishops in Rome. In the middle of her brief but powerful message she delivered this provocative interpretation of John 3:16:”

“Today God loves the world so much that he gives you, He gives me to love the world, to be His love, His compassion. It is such a beautiful thought for us—and conviction—that you and I can be that love and compassion.”⁸

Teresa grew a community around this conviction that felt called to be believers in the sense of the verb—to be followers of Jesus in expressing that love and compassion. Yet in her writings, it is clear that her professed “belief” was full of doubt, and although it was difficult, she was honest about her doubts, and she wrote about them:

“They say people in hell suffer eternal pain because of the loss of God—they would go through all that suffering if they had just a little hope of possessing God. In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing (Jesus, please forgive my blasphemies—I have been told to write everything). If there be no God—there can be no soul. —If there is no soul then Jesus—You also are not true. I am afraid to write all those terrible things that pass my soul. They must hurt You.”⁹

Fletcher continues: “Teresa continued to write about and grapple with such doubts through many of the same years in which she and the communities she formed were serving the poorest people on earth. Does this make her less of a ‘believer’ or worse, a fraud or hypocrite? She certainly wondered this at times. On the other hand, might her example underscore the point that

believing in Jesus is *mostly* about *following* him—*about being his light in the dark places of this world*—even when some of that darkness has descended on our own soul?

“I am on the side of those who see Teresa’s ability to embrace her calling to be ‘Jesus’ light’ *in spite of* such painful doubts as signs of authentic not false faith. Her ‘believing’ was *incarnate* in her actions even when it rested least securely in her mind and soul. And, her beautiful re-framing of John 3:16 redeems this verse from the trivialization it has too often suffered:

“Today God keeps on loving the world. God keeps on sending you and me to prove that God loves the world, that God still has that compassion for the world. It is we who have to be God’s love and compassion in the world of today.”⁹

Believing is the verb that brings people to follow that which can be.

Amen.

Sermon Resources:

1. Rev. Richard Smith, FCC Tucson, Arizona. In “Whoever,” an online theological magazine <http://www.whosoever.org/v2i4/john316.html>
2. Lectionary Homiletics, Volume XX, Number 2—February/March 2009. 4th Sunday in Lent, B—Pastoral Implications. Wally Fletcher, the Dialogue Center for Counseling & Consulting, Plymouth Meeting, PA pp. 66-67
3. Marcus Borg, Beliefnet video interview: <http://www.beliefnet.com/Video/Preachers-and-Teachers/Christianity/Marcus-Borg/Marcus-Borg-The-Real-Meaning-Of-John-316.aspx>
4. Kolodiejchuk, Brian, editor. 2007. *Mother Teresa-Come be My Light-The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta,"* (New York: Doubleday).
5. Kolodiejchuk, 40.
6. Ibid., 44.
7. CCN. com
8. Kolodiejchuk, 296.
9. Ibid., 192-193.
10. Ibid., 338.

Scripture for Lent 4B—John 3:14-21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“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.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”