

The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
The Rev. John Collins
October 13, 2019

It is an honor and a privilege to be with you this morning. In preparing for my sermon today, one phrase in our Gospel reading stood out for me. Jesus has healed the ten lepers, with only one returning to thank him for healing him. Aside from the surprise that only one would return, given that lepers were the outcasts of all outcasts in the first century, the phrase that caught my attention is when Jesus tells the man “your faith has made you well.” Faith – what a big word. In contemplating whether to preach on the issue of faith, I will admit that the lyrics from the song “fools rush in where angels fear to tread” came to mind. That being said, I thought it would be fruitful to explore what faith is and what it is not? How do we define it and what does it truly mean for us as followers of Jesus Christ?

In the New Testament, faith and belief are often used interchangeably. In chapter 11 of the Gospel of John, Jesus is comforting Mary and Martha at the death of their brother, Lazarus. Martha laments that if Jesus had only arrived earlier her brother would have not died. He says to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” This raises a very pertinent question, what is the difference between belief and faith? It is important to note that the word belief in Greek is *pistis*, which means “confidence or trust.” To the Greeks, it also meant “faithfulness.” Based on this expansive use of the word in the New Testament, in essence the words faith and belief are essentially one and the same. For us today, however, the use of these terms, at least in English, can have different meanings. One could argue that a person can believe in something—such as God or Christ—without truly having faith in them.

One of the things I most admire about the Episcopal Church is that we do not ask that you check your brain at the door. Episcopalians are, by in large, an educated lot. One of our strengths as a denomination, at least in my opinion, is that we are allowed to think for ourselves and to question. It’s okay to have doubts. Fredrick Buechner made this observation – “whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any

doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." As a priest, I can tell you that I have met many persons for whom Christianity is primarily an intellectual exercise. We are, after all, good children of the Enlightenment. In our scientific age, we seek rational support for our beliefs. St. Augustine had this to say about that, "God does not expect us to submit our faith to him without reason, but the very limits of our reason make faith a necessity." The Rev. Barbara Lundblad, a Lutheran pastor and seminary professor shares this story:

Years ago, I read something rather odd: "The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home." Whoever said that was playing with us a bit, for we know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there's another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, "This is crazy! I'm going home."

The life of faith can be like that—doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of believing in God seems crazy. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that. So he told them we're tied together like branches on the vine – or like climbers tied to the rope – tied together by the Spirit, to trust in one who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith, to encourage us when believing seems absurd. "I will not leave you orphaned," said Jesus. "I am coming to you."

Returning to the example of Mary and Martha and the death of their brother, Lazarus, they "believed" in Jesus' power. Yet, even so, they had doubts that Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead. But, Jesus took their "faith" in him, and proceeded to raise Lazarus from the dead. This brings me to an important observation about Jesus and the miracles that he performed. There are a number of examples where a demonstration of faith, often borne out of desperation to be sure, led Jesus to perform a miracle. The woman who touched the hem of Jesus's garment, the centurion who asked Jesus to heal his dying servant, to name but a few

examples. How critical was it for faith to precede Jesus' healing actions? There are of course, examples of Jesus performing a miracle without such an overt demonstration of faith, such as his turning water into wine at Cana. That said, it could be argued that faith was always foundational to Jesus' ability to perform miracles. At Cana, for example, his mother Mary demonstrated her faith in him to turn water into wine, as well as the servants that filled the jugs with water. Interestingly, in Mark chapter 6, we have story of Jesus returning to his hometown. He is not received well there, and Mark tells us, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.. The good news for us is that Jesus understands that faith can be difficult and reassures us that it only takes a tiny bit – the size of a mustard seed – to transform our lives and to do big things.

It is important to remember that faith is not static. It can and will grow with our experience of God in Christ. Like our muscles, it needs to be exercised or it will atrophy. It invites us to move out of our heads and into our hearts. In the end, faith is about learning to fully trust in God and accepting perhaps the greatest gift that comes with faith – a quiet but enduring hope. What better place to grow one's faith than right here in this tremendous community we call Trinity Church? We come together to worship, to learn and to share with one another our joys, accomplishments as well as our sorrows and grief. Here, we are given the opportunity to love God, to love our neighbor and to make a difference in this world through the many wonderful ministries offered by Trinity. Together we bear witness to one another of the faith that lives within us. Our Gospel reading this morning invites us to explore more deeply what a life of faith can truly be. Only one of the lepers came back to thank Jesus for their healing. Let us give thanks to God for this place we call Trinity, for the warmth and support of community it offers us and the healing that can come to each of us with the faith we place in Christ.

In truth, faith can be difficult to understand, much less quantify. After all, engaging the Divine is a mystery. Paul in I Corinthians describes it as "seeing through a glass darkly." Often

we do not know how much faith we really have until life places in situations where we come to discover that it is all that we have left to hold on to – the end of a bad marriage, the loss of a job or walking away from the grave of someone we don't know how we can live life without. In Hebrews we are reminded that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In closing, I would like to share a story that speaks to power of faith. It comes from the book, *God on the Witness Stand: Questions Christians Ask in Personal Tragedy*, by Daniel T. Hans:

The Holocaust is one of the terribly traumatic episodes of modern history, yet it has also yielded some astounding stories of bravery and faith. In France, a Jewish family were hidden by some concerned French nationals in the basement of their house. The Jewish family waited and waited for their deliverance. At the end of the war these words were found scribbled on the wall of that basement:

“I believe in the sun even when it does not shine.

I believe in love even when it is not given.

I believe in God even when he is silent.”

God bless you all.