

Belief and Unbelief

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago
Father Patrick Raymond

Coming down from the mountain, Jesus with Peter and James and John came to the disciples. They saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able! -- All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer." - Mark 9:14-29

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. - James 2:14-18

"I believe; help my unbelief!"

That desperate cry arises on the lips of a father from the heart of this morning's Gospel.

"I believe; help my unbelief!"

The man's son is plagued by a terrible illness. And not only that, the illness has been going on and on, since childhood, and all the while the stigma of demons. And not only that, the disciples of Jesus, who had recently been healing so many others, were unable to heal this boy.

The disciples' failure clearly agitated Jesus. To no one in particular and to all, he laments: "You faithless generation ... How much longer must I put up with you?" Then Jesus turns personal with the boy's father. Jesus seems to implicate the father in the outcome of his son's sickness or health, saying to him, "All things can be done for the one who believes."

We're told that the father responded to Jesus *immediately*. And we can also imagine that time stood still as the father reviewed and felt all of the years of worry and love and resources that

had been devoted to his son's condition. They had tried dozens of cures. Their hopes had been raised and dashed a hundred times. The whole saga is distilled in the man's heart as he cries out, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"

I gather that many of us here can recall a moment when that same cry was our own. Even if we are not a parent, and even if we have never cared for a chronically ill loved one, whether or not we think of illness in terms of demons: we know the moment when we cried out, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"

We may also recognize in ourselves the two distinctive parts of this cry ...

"*I believe!*" *I believe!* The part of *me* that *believes* believes "*in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*" I believe that my belief is shared in the context of '*one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.*' I'm grateful for the greater depth of meaning and the nuances and the cherished patina that those and other core beliefs have taken on over the years by reciting them whenever I gather with you or other Christians for worship.

I believe, in part, because I believe I've been blessed with at least a few glimpses of the Light of Christ and have seen a few miracles – miracles of healing, miracles of forgiveness, miracles of changed hearts. *I believe* and persevere in believing because I know others who believe and for whom the miracle has not happened but who nonetheless persevere in faith, hope and love.

What about you?

What is it that *you* believe, or that you *continue to believe*, and why?

When did you last examine what you believe?

Can you remember when an important belief changed – and was it a good or a bad change?

Alongside of the part or parts of *me* that *believe*, a part or parts of *me* are prone to *unbelief*. Some of my *unbelief* is due to my personal failures: laziness, fear of doing the right thing, distraction with trivial things, neglect of eternally important things.

And some of my *unbelief* is of a different nature. I've seen too much – too much hateful religion. My *unbelief* has seen too much 'belief' that requires everyone else to sign up for the exact same doctrines that got 'me' into God's special club. I've seen too much 'belief' that glorified religious tedium. My *unbelief* has seen too much 'belief' that required God to literally create the world in seven days. My *unbelief* has seen too much 'belief' that judged, shamed and separated people – in the name of God.

My *unbelief* feels an affinity with the author of today's lesson from James: "*Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.*" How dare we equate believing only with creeds and books and learned conversations and sound conclusions and not also with clothing and feeding our "*brother or sister [who] is naked and lacks daily food.*"

I tend to feel embarrassed by my *unbelief*, viewing it as an enemy of belief. My *unbelief* is sometimes complicit with or leads to cynicism or merely going through the religious motions or damaging the good faith of others. As is true with other Episcopalians I know, I sometimes wallow in my *unbelief* rather than seeing how it may be nudging or pushing me beyond myself to deeper and surer belief.

In more positive moments, my *unbelief* becomes a critical ally in finding my way to a deeper, livelier belief. My faith has more rough edges when my belief and my *unbelief* are in dialog. I am less articulate. I have more questions and may be completely silent regarding matters about which others can't seem to stop talking. My *unbelief* tends to defy the rules, to blur the old lines

between us and them. But my resulting, if less erudite, belief tends to be more natural and satisfying in my relationships, my work and my choices.

Returning briefly to the gospel, notice that the father of the desperately sick child does not ask Jesus to end or texorcise his *unbelief*. Rather, he cries out "*help my unbelief!*" The Greek word here for *help* (βοήθεια, bo·ē·the·i·ā) has a tone of urgency: *Come to the aid of my unbelief. Please enlist my unbelief in the greater cause of my belief.*

It may be that the courageous naming of his *unbelief* made the man all the more aware of his need for God, opened up his heart as an invitation, led him to see and learn and become more than he was—even apart from whatever the outcome in the illness of his son.

What about you?

When did you last take stock of and name your *unbelief*?

What are the chances that some feature of your *unbelief* may be your best ally in discovering a deeper and truer and more satisfying belief?

We all know enough psychology to know how some beliefs and unbeliefs are deeply embedded in us, become entrenched, quietly contribute, day after day, to our love or our disdain, our fear or our capacity to risk, our pushing away or our taking to heart. Most of us here also, I gather, periodically look through the items in the fridge. We sort those that are still viable from those that have passed their expiration dates. I gather we would be similarly prudent to periodically examine and similarly sort through both our beliefs and our unbeliefs. Which should be kept? Which should be timely disposed of?

We may imagine that the most important take-home line from this gospel story is the line of Jesus: "*All things can be done for the one who believes.*" Having a deeper, more resilient, more confident faith is certainly a worthy aim. But maybe the way for many of us to get there is to first take home the cry of the father and to take to heart both parts of his cry as our own: "*I believe, help my unbelief.*" Amen.