

## Sermon, Proper 14B, August 8, 2021, Jane A. Beebe

“Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.” (John 6:47-50)

One of my favorite reference sources is the *Exhaustive Concordance* (or as I sometimes refer to it: “The Exhausting Concordance) for the NRSV. I decided to look up the word “believe” to see how many times it occurs in the Gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke it used a dozen or so times in each. In the Gospel of John it is used, usually by Jesus, more than fifty times! In the first chapter of John it says, “But to all who received him, *who believed in his name* [italics mine], he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13) And then we hear that wonderfully mysterious statement: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” (John 1:14) Jesus is the living Word and the living bread.

I also looked up the meaning and etymology of the word “believe.” It is related to an Old English word that means to have faith or confidence in a person. It is also related to words that mean “to hold dear”, “to value”, “to love.” So something that is believable may also be that which is beloved. Clearly to believe in Jesus, in his works, in his Messiahship, in his resurrection, and his ability to give us life is a central theme of John’s Gospel.

Every week we proclaim together the Nicene Creed during a celebration of the Holy Eucharist, or the Apostles' Creed during Morning Prayer. The creeds sum up our beliefs about God, and how our lives are framed and transformed. It is important that we say them together. If we say them from the heart, not from our minds only, we are strengthened and supported in our common faith. From week to week, we may not have the strength on our own to believe. In the creeds we reacquaint ourselves with God's gifts to us: God's grace. The words may be so familiar now that they may feel formulaic. Yet some of what we affirm is miraculous stuff! "...For us, and for our salvation he came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man..."

In a Eastertide reflection on what it is to believe, Br. David Vryhof of SSJE said this: "Faith is a matter of the heart. True faith engages us at the deepest level of our being. It is a life-transforming power that connects us with the very life of God. It is the source of the new life that God gives, that eternal life which has been promised to us." Believing is closely aligned with faith and trust. We may sometimes think of belief, faith, and trust as goals of the religious life. What if, instead they are the gifts of a religious life? Jesus tells us our faith need only be the size of a mustard seed in order to accomplish much. Sometimes, just a bit of belief or trust is all we need to get from A to B. Belief, faith, and trust can support us,

anchor us, lift us, move us. A beautiful circle is created wherein God, coming close to us, gives us the faith we need in order for us to then move closer to God. Belief is like a life raft that floats us closer to shore.

In order to float, we must have some confidence—or belief—that this is possible, that the water will hold us up. I have always loved the water. As a small child I once walked into a river until the water was nearly over my head with no fear. That same summer my parents enrolled me in swimming lessons! Teaching a child to float is the first and most basic swimming lesson. It is easiest to begin by floating on one's back. To help a child feel safe, an adult swim instructor will support the child's head on his shoulder, supporting the child's back with his hands. The child is encouraged to spread his arms out to the side. Once the child is feeling more confident, the instructor will let the child rest his head in the water, but still support the child's back. Gradually the child is supported with just one hand, then a few fingers. Finally the child can float unsupported.

I think this describes how God helps us to come to belief. God supports us completely when we need it. We can rest our heads on his shoulder. Gradually we are released to float in God's all-embracing love, yet constantly nourished with his presence in the form of living bread. This summer I experienced again what this feels like: to float, to be sustained, to find trust.

One of my close friends loves stand-up paddle boarding. She and her husband now own their own paddle boards and carry them everywhere in the summer. When they are able to snatch a few hours to relax, they find a lake nearby and go out. I was invited to go along recently with a small group and a lovely instructor. I haven't yet achieved standing up on the paddle board. That didn't matter. Someday I'll get the knack. Yet it was so lovely to be out on the water. I just pretended I was in a canoe. We were on Lake Metacomet in Belchertown that is quite close to where I live. We gathered at about 7 o'clock and stayed until the sun had set.

When it was time to make our way back to shore, my friend paddled close to me, and without words attached her paddle board to the front of mine. Paddle boards come equipped with all kinds of bungee cords and Velcro straps. She went first, and I came up behind. It was kind of like being on a tandem bike. I remember it had been a day when I was feeling especially worn out. The time on the water would have been healing enough, as it usually is for me. And I probably could have paddled back under my own steam. Yet I was so touched that she decided to help me. It was companionable; I felt cared for. I told her that when I next experienced a time of needing to know viscerally what it felt like to be supported, helped, to be led back to shore, I would remember that evening. I am glad I put it into words. It was a God moment.