

Sixteenth Sunday after Whitsunday

Psalm 19

Isaiah 50:4-9

Mark 9:14-29

A peculiar and curious thing has been happening to me, lately. It has been happening much more often in recent months. And I have almost begun to expect it.

I will be at a party talking with folks I do not know. Or on a broken down T conversing with strangers. Or having casual conversation with my seat mate on an airplane.

Eventually the inevitable happens. I can feel it coming—yet I still have few moments to brace myself. They always ask: And what do you *do*?

I could play it safe and funny and say: I do lots of things. I go on runs by the Charles River. I read the New York Times. I go to museums. I spend hours on Facebook.

Or I could lie, or bend the truth and say: Well, I work for a historical non-profit in Boston, with hope that could be the end of the conversation, but it wouldn't be, so I tell the truth.

And nine out of ten times I hear: You're a minister? They look with suspicion. Perhaps it is my youth, my age—or perhaps it is that I don't quite look like your average, everyday minister, when I'm not wearing a fancy robe and stole. Whatever that looks like.

But whatever the reason, when their brow unfurls, and their shock recedes, the next question follows,

Well, what do you *believe*?

And, for some reason, as if it had been rehearsed, I begin to excuse myself, my profession, my tradition. I begin:

“Well, I don't believe that Christianity is the only valid path to God.”

“I don't believe you have to go to church to be a good person.”

“I don't believe that gay people are sinful.”

“I don't believe that science conflicts with religion.”

“I don't believe that the bible should be read literally.”

I don't believe. I don't believe. I don't believe.

I begin to rattle off a list of disbeliefs—those beliefs that 'other people of faith' might believe in, but I certainly do not.

But of course, that wasn't the question. They do not ask me what I *don't* believe. They ask me what I *do* believe.

Reciting a litany of disbeliefs seems to be so much easier. For some reason, I struggle in stating what I *do* believe

I think I find it hard to state my beliefs because the honest answer is that I am unsure.

There are, of course, looming theological questions that are hard to answer. Questions that appear time and time again as we read through the scriptures and explore the Christian tradition: Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Was he really born of a virgin? Did the Red Sea part? Did manna, bread, really rain down from the sky? Do I really believe what I am saying in this prayer?

And then there are questions even more difficult to answer. Questions that arise on what seems to be a daily basis. You know these questions:

Why is there such suffering? Why is there pain?

Why do terrible things happen to good people?

Why did he have to get cancer?

Why did the marriage have to end?

Why didn't the money last? Or the job come through?

Why is there so much division and hatred?

How many more have to die? Who will save them? How will this end?

Questions about our life, our world, our humanity that cause us to pause and think. Occurrences that shake the strongest of beliefs and cause us to question. Just turn on the television and watch the news. Or scan the Boston Globe.

Why did God allow this? Does God want this? Did God leave us? Does God love us? Does God even exist?

In our New Testament reading this morning, Jesus encounters a father with a very sick son. He encounters a father who reeks of desperation. Whose heavy eyes show pain and hopelessness. His spine curved, from the many years bending low to care his son.

He was at the end of his rope and out of options. He had tried everything that he could think of—and still his son suffers. So, turning to Jesus he says, “Have pity, have mercy on us, and help us.”

Jesus responds curiously, “If you are able! —All things can be done for the one who believes.”

And the father, with this suffering son in his arms, cries out “I believe; help my unbelief.”

He could have responded with anger that Jesus was tying the healing of his son with belief. Or he could have responded by rattling off a list of disbeliefs, but he doesn't. The father responds: I believe, help my unbelief.

I believe; help my unbelief.

The father's plea, his prayer, can have different meanings. Biblical Commentators say it could mean “Change my unbelief into belief.” “Chase away my doubts” “Help my want of faith, and while you're at it, heal my child.”

Or, or perhaps the father is saying “Help me *even* in my unbelief.” He is giving a final cry.

For the father's confidence was nearly gone; and he was ready to buckle. His son was suffering and relief was hard to find. And not even Jesus—not even the one whom the rumors said could feed the hungry, calm the seas, breath life back into the dying—not even Jesus could bring assurance.

I believe; help my unbelief.

One commentator wonders if the father is saying, “Listen Jesus, belief is hard. Belief that our situation will improve is difficult. I want to have hope, I want to, really I do, but this life, this world, and all its ills has left me without hope. And yet, I do hope—I hope because what else can I do.” A paradox.

The father's plea is less about belief in a set of doctrines or a particular idea of who Jesus or God is and more about his *hope*, his raw, wanting, vulnerable hope that this son would one day be healed.

Hope is a dangerous thing. A wanting thing.

Hope can leave us vulnerable and scared. But hope, hope has the power to stare our fears and our heartaches of this world head on. It has the ability to refuse the power of violence, silence the grip of illness, and undermine the sting of death. Hope does not deny the reality of our pain, the reality of loss, but has the strength and force to hold us in our mistakes, in our grief, is our heartache. A paradox.

Like this father, I think we are all strange mixtures of belief and unbelief. Hope and hopelessness. There is a tug-of-war in our minds and hearts. One day we cry, “Lord, I believe.”; the next day we pause and wonder about it.

Don’t be mistaken, this world is full of beauty and good. I see beauty everyday and I see it here. I see it in your actions toward one another and toward the world. From marching alongside Mothers for Peace, or standing in the hot sun at the gay pride parade, to rallying around a member who has lost a parent or a sibling, or extending a handshake a welcome to someone new.

We need that beauty and wonder to inspire and feed our hope, and to keep us tethered. Yet, as quickly as we can fill ourselves with such hope, a headline, a phone call, an incident can grab hold and we feel depleted.

It seems that sometimes we believe, we hope with unanimous heart that the world will change, that suffering will cease, violence will silence, and that peace will reign; and other times the highest point we seem to ever reach is “help my unbelief.”

And I think that’s okay. Because in our reading this morning, Jesus didn’t respond to the father by saying “Come now, tell me what you really believe.” or “I need more.” No, he healed the boy. He told him it was enough. And he met the father where he was. Met him in this tangled web of hopeless and hope, belief and unbelief. That’s what God does. God meet us where we are.

For us, his cry, his plea, is a prayer rising from *our* lives everyday.

To say “I believe, help my unbelief” is the best any of us can do really, but thank God it is enough.

Thanks be to God. Amen.