

A commentary by W. Eugene Marsh in *Feasting on the Word* says that “faith in the Bible is regularly understood as trust rather than belief”. This is helpful because in our gospel lesson and indeed throughout the gospel of John we are going to hear Jesus challenging his listeners to believe in him – and condemning those who don’t. The word believe can be problematic since when we hear the word belief in English we can get stuck on trying to prove what we proclaim we believe - like in the Nicene Creed when we saw “we believe in one God...” ‘blah, blah, blah’. This word “believe” implies that there are facts that we can prove objectively which can distort the truth of what we are trying to say.

Although philosophers and scientists can convince us that even facts are subject to interpretation I am going to stick with the old definition of pornography – I can’t define it but I know it when I see it, meaning a fact is something concrete enough to be accepted as true. And perhaps the same thing can be said about belief. There, I think that I have just compared belief and pornography.

See if you can work that one out offline.

Moreover in Greek the word for “faith” is the same as the word “to believe”. Therefore we might be able to substitute “trust” i.e. “faith” for “belief” and see where that gets us. So when we read “that whoever trusts in him [the Son of Man] may have eternal life” it puts a different spin on what Jesus is saying. Now it sounds like Jesus is saying that if folks trust what he is saying and act accordingly, then their lives will be different. Belief can sound as if we have a structured thought process that we can bring out in an argument with someone who does not accept what we “believe”. Trust involves the head and the heart. We can all learn to trust before we have all the facts – if we didn’t we would never learn to trust someone until we had known them for a really long time, and we trust based on more than just objective data.

So Jesus is asking for trust, which is that least halfway to believing even if it is less concrete. This idea of trust is important because there is no commitment without trust. Yesterday I participated in a program called *Building Community: Managing, Strengthening and Growing Volunteers* held at the Mercer School in Garden City. Coincidentally!!! my presentation was on Trust Development. Trust Development is the foundational building block for successful leadership, trust being necessary not just between the leader and the members of the organization or group or team but between the members themselves.

Once again Jesus has displayed a solid understanding of organizational behavior so it was nice to know I am on the right track! . We have a completely different scenario in our reading from Numbers. Trust is nowhere in evidence! The people have been following Moses through the desert and they are murmuring, not just against Moses but against God, the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt. They are cranky. They are tired of the food, they are tired of being dependent on God for water and it’s not like this is the first time that they have complained. In the book of Exodus they had complained about bitter water and God fixed that. Later on they were hungry and received Manna. Another time they received water from a rock. You would think by this point they would have faith, they would believe that God was with them and they would trust in what would happen next. But no. In the book of Numbers they complain another seven times and six of those seven times they are punished by God. You might think that they would get the point, but no; fire, plague, leprosy, aimless wandering,

more fire, another request for water which was legitimate, and finally serpents. The serpents we read about today. God has had enough. God sends serpents that bite them and kill them. Quickly they realize the error of their ways. They ask Moses to intercede for them, they acknowledge their sin and they ask for forgiveness. Underneath all this is a kind of faith, albeit a reluctant one – but aren't we the same when things are out of control and we come face to face with our dependence on God?

So Moses intercedes for them and God provides a cure, this bronze serpent that is lifted on a pole to be gazed upon by anyone who is bitten by a serpent.

It's a strange tale but the gist of it is that the same thing that can kill you is the same thing that can cure you. Doesn't that sound like the adage "that which doesn't kill you can make you stronger"? People say that to be reassuring but it is more complicated than that. That which doesn't kill you may break you - it could be physical or mental illness, tragedy that strikes you or those you love, or any number of hardships from which it is very difficult to recover. And yet, it is true that there are times when adversity will make us stronger. The muscle fibers that are stretched in training can grow stronger when allowed to recover. The performance that wasn't perfect can be improved with feedback. The failure that is examined can lead to success. It was Thomas Edison who said "I have not failed. I've just have found 10,000 ways that won't work." Repentance and forgiveness can transform a life. In fact sometimes early success can stunt our growth. So in this case it is the image of the snake whose bite was lethal which can provide healing.

God's ways are not our ways and these ways are not without cost as Jesus will tell his disciples when he refers to this episode in our gospel lesson. "Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus is of course alluding to his death on the cross, the pole upon which he will be lifted. The paradox is that his life given for us, his death, opens for us the way to eternal life. The sign of the cross will bring healing for all who believe. But we are not to be passive recipients of this action. Jesus' death creates an opportunity for us, the opportunity to believe, to have faith, to trust that he has opened for us a new way to be in relationship with God, a way that transforms our life in the here and now but also in the life to come. The challenge is for us to choose to believe.

The other aspect of belief in the Gospel of John is that belief is not just a mental state or a feeling. To believe is not just to say "yes" we trust that Jesus is the Son of God but to follow him, to follow him into active relationship with his Father and in active obedience to his Father. Our "yes" to the Son of God requires action on our part. We don't earn the opportunity – which is what we hear loud and clear in the letter to the Ephesians "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of you own doing, it is the gift of God." We respond with action in gratitude for the gift we have been given.

The theologian Avery Dulles has said that faith is "a discernment within a commitment," which means that in trust we do what is expected of us and in so doing we grow to understand what it is to have faith and to believe.

Jesus sums it up when he says “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.”

May we find it to be so.

Amen