

Pentecost 11B (8/5/2018)

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Psalm 78:23-29

Ephesians 4:1-16

John 6:24-35

To do the work of God is to believe in Jesus, the one whom God has sent. But belief is much more than intellectual assent to a proposition. To believe means to embrace, to trust, to hold tight to Jesus as the incarnation of God's love in the world. Jesus is not an idea to accept or reject, but daily bread to eat.

How can you possibly believe? It just doesn't make sense. An ordinary man from first-century Palestine is God's word in the flesh, one with God from the beginning of time? One person embodies God's love for the whole world, past, present, and future? He endures the worst death we can dream up, yet he rises from the grave to give us hope that death is not the end? None of this story conforms to the way we have come to understand reality. **Human beings are subject to our own limited capacity, and mostly self-interested. We reveal only our own character, not God's. And, we certainly don't rise from the dead. Jesus is a cultural relic – isn't he? – a legend we cling to out of fear, or habit, or delusion. How can we possibly believe otherwise?**

The crowds that flock to Jesus in our Gospel from John today are intrigued by something, but they too are unsure of him. "Rabbi, when did you come here?" "What must we do to perform the works of God?" "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?" They pepper

him with questions, hoping to draw out his sense of purpose and his relationship to God. ***Give us some certainty, something we can rely on, the people demand. Otherwise, how can we possibly believe?***

And, Jesus affirms that belief is essential to the good life, the life that God intends for us: “For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” What’s more, belief is central to our purpose as people of God: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent.” **No matter how God relates to the world – creating and sustaining us, holding us accountable, forgiving us, renewing us – we relate to God through *belief*.**

But, what does it mean to believe? In the modern sense of the word, belief is a function of the mind. To believe means to affirm the truth of a proposition. In other words, “I believe in Jesus” has come to mean “I acknowledge that Jesus is in reality the crucified and risen Son of God,” or “I am convinced that the information about him is factual.” But, **belief involves much more than intellectual assent to an idea; it’s as much a matter of the heart as it is of the mind.**

In Latin, the word for “believe” is *credo*, the origin of the word “creed.” *Credo* means “I set my heart upon,” or “I give my loyalty to.” In medieval English, *credo* was translated as “believe,” similar to the German *belieben*, meaning “to prize, treasure, or hold dear,” the root of which is *Liebe*, or “love.”

In its most basic sense, then, **belief is relational. It's not so much an assertion of correct knowledge as it is a profession of trust and faithfulness, like a marriage vow.**¹ So, "I believe in Jesus" means "I treasure Jesus," "I devote myself to him," "I pledge him my loyalty."

This definition breathes new life into the last verse of our Gospel today: "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'" **To believe means to embrace, to trust, to hold tight to Jesus as the incarnation of God's love in the world. Or, in keeping with his famous bread metaphor, it means to crave God's word of hope, to feast on God's gifts of grace, and to be strengthened by the bread of life for loving service to others. Jesus is not an idea to accept or reject; he is daily bread to eat, manna from heaven, the food that never perishes. To believe in him is to sit down and eat.**

Of course, we often neglect to show up for the meal God sets out for us; we fall short of fulfilling our end of the covenant God establishes with us. Our lives are often marked by *unbelief*, like the first disciples who followed Jesus but struggled to truly know him. Nevertheless, **Jesus offers himself to us as bread, his very life, broken and shared far and wide. And Sunday after Sunday, we recognize him again in the breaking of the bread,**² in real food meant to sustain real lives, lives broken by our own unbelief and

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 117.

² Luke 24:35.

the unbelief of the world. And, although we may not fully grasp him – although we have more questions than answers – we don't need to be able to wrap our heads around Jesus in order to receive him. We just come to the table and reach out our hands. And if truth be told, to borrow the words of French reformer, Jean Calvin, I'd "rather experience [communion with Christ] than to understand it."³

Dear church, **to believe in Jesus, the one whom God has sent, is to experience him. It is to meet him in sacred story, to be fed by him at a weekly meal, to catch a glimpse of him in the faces of friends and strangers, and finally, to become bread for the world God loves.** So, come to the table, all you who hunger for the bread of life, come, taste and see that the Lord is good!⁴

³ As cited by William H. Willimon, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 313.

⁴ Psalm 34:5.