

Title: The Limits of Belief, the Possibilities of Faith

Text: John 12:37-50

Date: October 26, 2008

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The theme of believing or not believing in Jesus is a thread that runs through the fabric of this entire Gospel, but it is particularly prominent in the first twelve chapters. This passage provides a fitting conclusion to the first half of the Gospel.

In some ways this passage is a difficult text because of the tensions within the text. John tells us that even after Jesus had performed many signs in their presence they still would not believe in him. Then he explains why. John references two passages in Isaiah to explain their unbelief and it reads as if God deliberately blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so they could not believe. But then in the very next statement John says, “Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him”—which seems to be a contradiction of his previous explanation.

Throughout John there is a tension between human freedom and God’s oversight. On the one hand, the Gospel emphasizes human responsibility and the freedom to choose; but on the other hand, there are passages where God’s sovereignty seems to override human free will. On the one hand John says, “Whosoever will may come”; but on the other hand, several times John says that no one will come unless the Father draws them. No where in the Gospel does John ever attempt to resolve this dilemma or resolve the contradiction.

This says something about the ambiguity of faith, giving us room to question. This is difficult for people who think they have to have all the answers. Maybe you were raised by parents who said, “You don’t question; you do as I say.” That’s a very hierarchical way of relating that small children may need; but it’s a very unhealthy way of relating to teenagers. And we certainly don’t relate to our peers this way do we? And yet how often does this pattern appear in churches. Christian leaders tell their congregations: “This is the truth, and there is nothing to question.” A responsible Christian leader doesn’t tell his or her faith community what to think or believe, rather, a responsible leader encourages them to think for themselves.

Unfortunately, there are those who equate the process of questioning one’s beliefs with a “lack of faith.” I would argue just the opposite. If our faith is confined to a belief system, then if our belief system collapses, then we have no place to stand, and that is a frightening prospect. But if our faith is in a God who is vastly greater than any belief system, then we can question our belief system without being afraid of losing our faith. In fact, questioning what we believe becomes an essential part of growing our faith.

A mature faith can hand any assault on our belief system, without destroying our faith in God. We might think of a small boat on the surface of the ocean. On a turbulent sea our little boat might get tossed about and battered by the waves threatening shipwreck. Let the boat represent what we have been taught to believe about God; the ideas, concepts, and perceptions that form our beliefs. But down in the ocean depths, beyond the storm, there is calm—let that represent our faith. Our beliefs and our faith are not synonymous.

Let's draw another analogy. Let the sky represent the vastness and immensity of God. Let's suppose we attempt to look at the sky through a straw; the straw represents our belief system. To hold to a belief system without question as if that belief system fixes the contours of reality is like gazing at the sky through a straw. If you try to understand the sky and form some belief about the sky, but your only source of knowledge and understanding is what you see through your straw, your knowledge and understanding will be severely restricted. And so it is with God. No belief system can fully understand or explain God.

When we restrict God to our belief system then we restrict God to what we can see through our straw. Our faith then is limited to what we believe. We then become afraid to question our belief system because we fear losing our faith. We feel like we have to defend our beliefs against all challenges and so we get caught up in arguing that our straw is the only straw, as if the vastness of God could be seen through our singular perspective. Because of our human limitations we need our straws, but there is a wonderful freedom that comes when we are able to trust in God that is vastly larger and greater than any one can see through their straws.

A belief is the result of trying to grasp or explain something at a given point in time. For many years people believed that the earth was the center of the universe. As scientific inquiry and observation evolved that belief was overturned. All beliefs come wrapped in the cultural package of the times. This is why beliefs need to be constantly revisited and challenged. If a living faith under girds our beliefs then we are free to seek God and pursue God wherever God may be found. We are free to constantly revisit and question our beliefs as well as consider the beliefs of others.

I think Paul leans toward this when he says in his letter to the Philippians: “brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” What is true is true, what is right is right, what is noble is noble—wherever and whenever and however you encounter it. If we have a living faith in the great and good God who has revealed his grace and truth in Jesus, then we will know what this is, we will be able to discern truth, we will recognize what is true and noble and right and pure and lovely and praiseworthy in our own faith tradition, in the faith tradition of others, and in our secular world.

In John's Gospel there is a universalism that shows up in several texts. Listen to these words from John's prologue in chapter one. John is talking about the Logos, the Word and Wisdom of God. He says: "In him was life, and that life was the light of all people"—all people, not just Christian people, all people. Then a little further on in the passage he says: "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world." The light of God's grace and truth has become illuminated in the coming of Christ, but John says this universal light gives light to everyone. This light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. If we are in touch with this light, if we are being illumined by this light, the light of God's truth that is within us—that finds expression Christ, the Word made flesh—then we can know what is true and good and right and noble and pure and trustworthy. John writes of Jesus: "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one believes in me should stay in darkness." John contends that those are illuminated by the light within will recognize in Jesus the embodiment of the light of God. Faith connects us to this living source of truth and grace. And as we grow in faith, in our connection to the truth of God within, in our experience of God in Christ, in our experience of God's wisdom and grace, then we are free to constantly revisit and question our beliefs.

When there is no freedom to question or challenge our belief system, our belief system can easily become oppressive. We see this very thing in the Gospels with some of the religious leaders who held a tight grip on their belief system. When Jesus challenged the conventional wisdom of their belief system they became defensive and angry. Their hate for Jesus became so strong that they were compelled to kill him.

The questions that we need to ask of our beliefs are questions like: Do our beliefs help to transform us into more loving, compassionate persons? Do our beliefs inspire us to work for justice, for the equity and good of all people? Do our beliefs help us to recognize pride and prejudice and favoritism when we see it? (Not just in others, but in ourselves.) Do our beliefs help to nurture faith in the unconditional love, grace, and forgiveness of God?

I haven't seen Bill Maher's film "Religulous" where he pokes fun at religion, and after having read a couple of reviews I don't think I want to see the film. From what I can tell Maher holds up for ridicule the worst in the religious traditions. Robert Parham, the director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, describes Maher's approach as "egotism run amuck." Douglas Hicks, professor at the University of Richmond, observes that while Maher paints religious fundamentalism as absurd and even dangerous he gives a completely one-side critique when he lumps all religious expression together. He calls Maher a secular fundamentalist. Fundamentalism, which derives from the notion that one has a monopoly on the truth, can be secular as well as religious.

Healthy religion is just as liberating and good, as unhealthy religion is oppressive and evil. Religion is oppressive, Christianity is oppressive, when we hold our beliefs rigidly,

without ever questioning them, presuming the absoluteness of our views, positioning ourselves as the ones who have God on our side. When beliefs are treated as treasured commodities and we are the privileged owners, then we feel like we have to protect our property against all intruders. So we hunker down in our fortress prepared to shoot down any one who trespasses on our beliefs.

When we equate faith with belief we are driven to live defensively and fearfully. We feel that we have to defend the truth. I have no doubt that the Baptist minister that led the charge to de-fellowship our congregation believed that they were defending the truth. When Jesus said on the cross, regarding his killers, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” in one sense they really didn’t know. They believed they were doing God’s will by killing Jesus. They thought they were defending the truth.

Fear suppresses and diminishes faith. A vibrant, dynamic, open, growing faith casts out fear; it opens our minds and fills our hearts with God’s love and compassion. It widens our hospitality and enlarges our embrace. It enlivens our spirit and inspires a contagious joy.

There is no need for us to be afraid, to be defensive, to feel like our group are the only ones who have the truth—not if our faith is a living faith grounded in the truth of God that we have experienced first hand. God is greater than we can possibly think or imagine

Gracious God,

Help us to see the difference today between what we believe, and a real, authentic, dynamic faith that is greater than any belief. Give us the courage to trust you beyond what we can believe or even imagine. May our faith grow stronger and deeper and larger while we constantly examine and test our beliefs. Fill us, your children, with your love and grace for our sake and for your kingdom’s sake. Amen.