

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
February 6, 2022 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: John 4:46-54, John 5:1-9

Sermon: Do you believe?

A number of years ago I used to do some volunteer work at a local high school, in a program designed to provide spiritual support to students. Some of the volunteers for the program have been Christian ministers, others have been Jewish rabbis or Muslim imams, some have been indigenous elders or Bahai leaders, even one Roman Catholic sister – as I said it is a multifaith organization.

The principal suggested that I be in touch with the teacher who ran the “Christian Club”, to attend one of their meetings and explain my role. I got in touch with her, explained who I was and tried to invite myself to the group. She asked me this question: “Do **you** believe?” I was surprised, because I had already explained who I was, and my role as a minister in the church, so I said “Believe what?”

Then she proceeded to impart a long checklist of all the things she thought I needed to believe in order to qualify for attending her Christian club. It was a list that probably would have put the Apostles’ Creed to shame for being too liberal. By the time she got to the Virgin Birth, I had to say: “It’s not about what I believe – I am not here to tell other people what to think. I would treat Christian students the same way I would treat a Muslim or Buddhist student who had a spiritual question. I would try to help them explore their relationship with God whatever their tradition.”

That must have satisfied her because I was invited to go to the Christian club. But it wasn’t the first time and probably won’t be the last time that I have been asked to prove my Christian faith by demonstrating a certain set of beliefs.

In fact, when people tell me they don’t believe in God, I often ask what it is they don’t believe. Usually it’s a lot of that check list the teacher had: world created in 7 days, original sin, virgin birth, salvation only through Jesus... People are usually surprised to learn that I don’t put a lot of faith in those things either, that I don’t take the Bible literally or believe that non-Christians are going to hell.

Marcus Borg, in his writing for people of faith, spent a lot of time trying to help us understand what it means to “believe” or to “have faith”. Most modern definitions say that believing or having faith requires intellectual assent to the “fundamental truths” of the faith tradition, whatever creed that may be. We also use the word “believe” when we don’t really know something for sure, or it hasn’t been scientifically proven, or we would like to think it is true, in spite of all the facts pointing in the opposite direction.

Borg describes that intellectual definition of faith or belief as a phenomenon created for a world where we try to find the truth within all the facts and figures, or we accept an

expert opinion, because we have confidence in the scientist or theologian or philosopher or researcher whom we trust.

That definition of faith would not have fit in the ancient world, however, the world where our scriptures and our traditions were written, shaped and formed. They had a different understanding of truth, seeking a truth that went beyond things we can prove. Ancient writers expressed a truth that we can only understand by beginning with a good metaphor. If you've ever asked someone a question, perhaps an elder or someone of another culture, and in response you received a story, then you know what I'm talking about.

The first step to having a better understanding of faith and belief, Borg tells us, is found in the English translation of the original Latin and Greek words that are used to refer to "belief" and "faith".

First of all, it is very rare in any ancient manuscript for "belief" to be used as a noun. It is almost exclusively a verb – believing is always an action word. It could be defined or written down, it could only been seen by witnessing, demonstrating, or affirming. One's belief required action.

In old English the term believe also always had a person attached to the belief, rather than a thing or a statement. You didn't "believe **that**" you "believed **in**." You didn't believe **that** the world was created in 7 days, you **believed in** God as creator. Believing **IN** someone means to trust them or to have confidence in them. Marcus Borg wrote about the root of the word belief, how it was actually closer to our word "beloved" - the one we hold dear, or to whom we are loyal.

We love God, we love Jesus and we live according to that relationship with them.

Today in our scripture readings, we heard two stories of faith healing from the gospel of John. I have preached on both these stories before. But since I am following a new lectionary or schedule of readings, I have realized that I never looked at these two side by side stories together.

In the first story, we have an official from the palace, who presented himself before Jesus because his son is sick unto death. It is a pretty typical faith healing. The official demonstrated his faith and, even though Jesus is a bit non-committal in his response, the boy was saved. There are lots of these stories in the gospels, so we tend to take them for granted. Faith+Jesus=healing.

Now looking at that healing **IN CONTRAST** to the story that follows it. Jesus also encountered a man with a disability. This man didn't ask Jesus to heal him, this time it was Jesus approached him, and asked if he would like to be made well. In response, the man shows no faith, it is clear he didn't believe Jesus could heal him. After 38 years all that man wanted was someone to take him through the crowd to the pool before he got stepped on.

The man was not going to become a follower – he didn't even bother to learn Jesus' name. Still, Jesus said to him "take up your mat and walk". And the man was made well.

So not only does Faith+Jesus=Healing, apparently No Faith+Jesus also = healing. Healing is God's gift to us, and Jesus channels that healing, not on the basis of **our** faith convictions or **our** membership or **our** status. The healing in this story happened because of **Jesus' faith**.

Do you believe?

I heard a woman describing how she left the church because when she was ill, and her prayers for healing were not answered, the church told her "Your faith isn't strong enough."

"Do you believe?"

Yes, but that doesn't mean I expect to be first place in line for healing or wisdom or prosperity or good luck.

"Do you believe?"

Yes, but I also believe in God's many ways of healing. Perhaps God's holy healing will mean something different than what I am expecting or hoping for.

"Do you believe?"

Yes, but it doesn't mean that I think someone who believes something different than I do is wrong.

"Do you believe?"

Yes, because I believe in the God who holds me beloved. And not only me, but you, and the cranky man by the pool, and the stuffy official who wanted his own son to be healed all the while supporting a system that kept other people poor and unhealthy. We are all beloved, and we are worthy of healing, in body and spirit, and love and community.

There are a lot of voices in the world, and it is very easy, too easy, to use the word "believe" in order to avoid tough questions and the answers we don't like. If we use the word believe only to make up for a gap in our knowledge or study – If we use the word believe only to reinforce our own opinion - then we are betraying the one who gifted us with our curiosity in the first place.

When there are so many different opinions about who to believe and who is telling the truth, we need to ask ourselves who is offering us what our beloved has called us to – healing and equity, compassion and care. A community that seeks truth in answers that support and heal whatever is broken.

In whom do you place your faith, your heart, your beloved?

May God give us the wisdom and the understanding to believe our beliefs and act on our faith with hope, courage and a whole heart. Amen