

Believing Matters

July 7, 2024

Do YOU Believe?

A long time ago in a place far, far away, when my tiny grade school put on a production of Peter Pan, I turned down the role of Wendy, the female lead, because it was my lifelong dream (at age 9) to be Tinker Bell. In our production, Tinker Bell had no solos, no singing, but the story of Peter Pan had been my favorite story all of my childhood, and Tink was my absolute favorite character. The version of the show that we did was the one that includes Tinker Bell growing weaker and weaker because no one believes in her. In fact, she almost dies, but then the audience is encouraged to clap if they believe in fairies, and their demonstration of belief restores her strength.

The “work of the people” in that play, the fact that Tink wasn’t going to come back to life if there was just a smattering of applause, came to mind as I was studying and praying today’s Gospel. Today’s Gospel is a fabulous passage about the power of belief AND the power of unbelief. Much of what I’m about to share is indebted to David Lose of Luther Seminary and Bruce Epperly of the Process Theology Network.

Let’s take a closer look at our text: Jesus goes home to Nazareth, and “He could do no deed of power there.” WHAT? Jesus went home and was preaching to people who knew all about him, who had watched him grow up, who knew his family. Let me tell you, I never quite understood this passage until I preached at my hometown church. While I’m sure I wasn’t as rousing as Jesus, I now have a TON of empathy for him in this situation. It’s hard for those who watched you through the pimply braces phase, who dated you or turned you down for a date, to see you as profound or even credible.

What’s more, Jesus isn’t just patting them on the back, telling them what good and faithful people they are. If his teaching on his home turf are anything like the rest of his preaching, he’s talking about changing our ways, being more just and more inclusive and less greedy, not merely telling people what they want to hear. So, not only does the sermon Jesus preaches in his hometown land like a lead balloon, the way Mark tells the story, instead of the local headlines framing the experience as “local boy makes good,” we start to hear rumbles more in line with, “look who’s gotten too big for his britches and doesn’t remember where he comes from.”

Maybe it was just really hard for them to imagine that someone as ordinary, and perhaps someone with as tainted a background or upbringing as Jesus, could possibly make good. Maybe they could not reconcile the ordinary with the extraordinary and felt shown up somehow by comparison. Maybe the fact that he had grown and they had not felt like an indictment. A lot of us can resonate with that, with our families, our friends, those who have known us the longest sometimes not recognizing the beauty, the divine spark, within us.

This is a classic experience within 12 step and sobriety circles, when the family system from which we came denies or even sabotages our health because it will disrupt the status quo. Whatever the reason was, the people of Nazareth refused to acknowledge Jesus and this, somehow, seems to limit Jesus’ power. He had already raised a dead girl to life with two words. All that had to happen to heal a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years was that she

touch the fringe of his cloak. And now we hear that when people don't believe in his hometown, he can't work.

The Application

The big question is what does this matter to us? And, further, why does this scene make a lot of us, particularly people who are active in church, so uncomfortable? The two are related. Mark seems to suggest here that how Jesus is received affects his ability to work, to make manifest the kingdom of God through what he calls "deeds of power." That's troubling because we've been schooled to think – actually count on – the fact that God doesn't need us, that God isn't inhibited by our faith or lack thereof, that indeed what I believe or think or do matters not even a little bit when it comes to God accomplishing God's purposes. Countless times I've sat at the sides of hospital beds and gravesites, assuring families that whether or not someone believes in God's love doesn't make God's love any less true.

One of the central elements of the doctrine of salvation "by grace through faith" is precisely that it's ALL up to God. God is the one who justifies. It's by grace, not by our work. Our faith is really just an awareness of and trust in what God has done. Instead, what this passage is saying is that we actually have something to do, that we have a key role to play in the manifestation of the kingdom. To say it another way: this isn't about whether or not we're saved or what happens when we die, it's about the role each one of us is invited to play in sensing, experiencing, and making known God's love and work in the world here and now.

We're the salt in the pot of boiling water – it's going to happen with or without us, but we can affect the intensity and the speed. The Gospel writer is telling us that there is a synergy of divine and human openness that is a factor in the transformation of this world. This is a revelation: that God's immanence in the world is concrete, but it depends on context; that despite his healing powers, Jesus is limited by people's unbelief; that even God must adapt as circumstances present themselves. Remember, our God is non-coercive. That is, God, doesn't force us into belief. Rather we are invited and cajoled into relationship.

Conclusion

This story teaches us that there is a power to belief and to unbelief. Whether you believe or not DOES matter. We all know of both the placebo effect and the faith factor in health and illness. We're aware that positive images, hopefulness, and faith, can awaken the inner movements in our cells and spirits toward well-being that does not occur among indifferent or pessimistic individuals or communities. What's interesting is that we're less likely to acknowledge that disbelief and negativity can diminish the vitality of our cells as well as our souls. This is not magic or supernaturalism, but a recognition that amid the factors that determine health and illness, faith opens us to new energies which can become the tipping point toward healing and growth.

This is also a story about persistence. Despite the unbelief of his hometown crowd, Jesus keeps his course steady. Jesus knows that he is called to heal and teach a transformed way of being and to bring mercy and justice and compassion and hope. So, to us, this passage says, "Don't give up, just because others don't believe in you." Even if there isn't an obvious route or others stand in the way, there can still be relational and spiritual growth that draws us nearer to God, others, and living the life God created us to live. This passage teaches us that, even within adversity, there is

a resource within limitation, possibility even within our current context, that God's blessing and grace create possibility in every situation.

Friends, this passage encourages us to a renewed openness to God's work in our lives, households, communities, and world. It also calls us to ask: Where are those places we feel we are resisting God's activity in our lives? Is there an area – some regret we can't get over, some attitude we can't let go, some behavior that has come to define us, some addiction that imprisons us, some anger that has taken hold of us – that we are having difficulty entrusting to God? Between Jesus' tenacious witness of keeping on with his mission despite his inability to do works of power in his hometown and our passage from Romans that tells us not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, our scriptures today remind us not to give up and that if godly things seem to continually be thwarted in our lives, a change of context may be what it takes to get us back on track. Similarly, these scriptures beg us to ask if there is some opportunity we feel God might be inviting us to or some challenge or adventure God may be setting for us that we need to find the courage to embrace or entertain. Notice, these questions aren't about the quality of our salvation; rather, they are about the character of our Christian life.

Friends, the kingdom of God is bursting forth in our midst when we are open to it. We have a choice. Actually, we encounter innumerable choices every day. Do we emulate the woman with the faith that simply touching Jesus' cloak will heal her? Will we get on board with the father who believes enough to cross dogmatic lines if it means his daughter will be healed? Or will we cast our lot with the fickle crowd who limit Jesus because of their history, their past, their own small mindedness and lack of imagination?

The choice is ours, every day. Forty years after Grandview Elementary school put on Peter Pan, forty years after I turned down the lead in the school play in order to embody a character who depended on others, I, for one, still choose to be someone who believes.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Romans 12:1-17; Mark 6:1-13
July 7, 2024