

Faith vs. Belief

I have a story for you. Two guys are standing on Bishop Street looking up at the twin glass towers that used to be called Grosvener Center. At the top of the building, on the left, a man has pushed a plank over to the building on the right, connecting the two. He has a wheelbarrow.

The one guy on the ground says to the other: "What's the difference between faith and belief?"

"I dunno."

"Well, let me put it this way, do you **believe** that guy can push that wheelbarrow across that plank to the that building?"

"Sure. I believe he can do it!"

"Now, let me ask you this: do you have **faith** he can do it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Go sit in the wheelbarrow while he pushes it from one building to the next!"

For some of you, I know that's an old story. For others, I hope it's new. But for everyone, it seems just right, on this day when we celebrate the Trinity, Three Persons, yet one God, to spend some time on the difference between faith and belief.

On Thursday a bunch of us got together at Shim Hall to talk about the Nicene Creed. It's the creed we will say as soon as I sit down. It is a statement of our beliefs. People for centuries have argued, and refined, and split hairs over these beliefs. But today, something greater than belief is in the air.

Paul tells us today: "Since we are justified by **faith** we have peace with God..."

Especially on Trinity Sunday, a Sunday too often devoted to mind-numbing sermons on the precise nature of our beliefs in the Three Persons, yet one God.

I have some personal experience with this mind numbing. To become eligible for ordination, candidates for the priesthood must take and pass the general ordination exam. It's 5 days of essay tests on seven different areas ranging from Scripture to church governance. The questions come in a sealed envelope. You have three hours to answer each question.

On the first day, I opened my fist envelope and read my very first question. It was this:

At the First Council of Constantinople, a movement led by Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus, among others, resulted in the declaration of the Full Divinity of the Holy Spirit and the adoption of the third paragraph of the Nicene Creed. In a three page essay:

1. Describe the theological issues concerning the Spirit's divinity at the time of the First Council of Constantinople, the extent to which they were resolved and how.
2. Identify the ongoing theological implications of the First Council of Constantinople for contemporary pneumatology. Include in your answer the appropriate consideration of divine providence.

Now the reason priests give mind-numbing sermons about the Trinity is because the powers-that-be make us answer questions like that! But I digress.

I want to talk about faith vs. belief because the Trinity is "God in the wheelbarrow." Or, more accurately, God in OUR wheelbarrow. God is not some distant spirit, uninvolved, uninterested, leaving us to our own devices. The true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has bridged the gap between heaven and earth by becoming (horror or horrors) one of us! God climbed into our wheelbarrow.

Heaven, through the will of the Father, in the flesh of the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit, invaded earth.

And man, did we do it to God. The best person ever to be born; we took good care of him. Hung him on a tree and left him to rot. "Stick that in your pipe and smoke it," we collectively said to God.

We say it today when we insist on knowing what is best for ourselves, when we idolize money or fame or spend billions on weapons of war; when we become neurotic over personal safety; when we live life just trying to get through without getting hurt. That then, this now, is our NO to God.

Yet the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, will not take our NO as the last word. The Triune God, sitting in our wheelbarrow, took the very worst we could dish out—takes the very worst we can dish out—and gathers it all up, swallows it all down, and transforms death into life.

God climbed into our wheelbarrow to create the possibility of us climbing into God's wheelbarrow.

All that is asked of us is to have the simplicity of heart to let God's grace be God's grace. [Barth].

Now, we may have beliefs up the kazoo, but faith? Faith is much harder to let in. Faith is God's gift to us of surrender. Surrender of control. Surrender of grudges.

Surrender of hurt feelings. Surrender of my way or the highway. Such is the nature of God's wheelbarrow.

The ride is often harrowing. We may often be frightened. We may often want out. Yet, faith is staying in the wheelbarrow.

Elie Wiesel tells of so many who, because of the holocaust, gave up on faith. So many who concluded that a God who would not rescue his people from slaughter could not be a God who existed at all. Wiesel was not among those who jumped out of the wheelbarrow.

He tells the story of seeing a young teenage boy hung from the gallows in a concentration camp. It took nearly half an hour for him, as he struggled and jerked, to finally die. As this horror unfolded, a man yelled out: "Where is God?!"

Wiesel, standing next to the man, said: "There is God, hanging in the gallows."

What time in the wheelbarrow teaches us is that God is not superman, he is nor Miracle Max just waiting to rescue you and me from life's pain, even life's evil. No. The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, comes to us in our own crucifixions, and hangs with us. He come and hangs with us. [Willimon]. And in that, we are invited into the relationship beyond words shared by the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Is it any wonder our closest friends are those who were there in our darkest hours? Those who were there when everything felt raw and wounded? This should be no surprise since all of our relationships grow out of that relationship that exists in eternity, the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And with all due respect to the exam makers, the Trinity is not so much a philosophical question; the Trinity is an event. [Rutledge]. The Trinity happens in your life and mine every day. It happens in the give and take of our friendship with one another. The Trinity happens in our community as we each of us take and give, take and give.

Paul puts it this way: "We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts...." This is the work of the Trinity in your life and mine.

Not a love that protects us from every harm; but a love that is with us, no matter the harm.

Sitting in God's wheelbarrow means saying yes to being changed from the inside out, and from the outside in. From the inside out, meaning our own need for personal conversion, repentance, change. From the outside in, meaning the changes

that cry out for a more just, fair, and peaceful world; one in which existing structures of society that keep too many poor, too few rich, and nearly everyone anxious, are bent toward God's command that we live out who in truth we are: brothers and sisters of one God.

This makes for a life that reaches in and yanks at our deepest selves; that upends our most beloved prejudices, that invites us into the deepest mysteries of life; a life springing from Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It won't be smooth sailing. Be ready to get tossed upside down, twisted in knots, confused and perhaps sometimes totally baffled. In short, welcome to the journey of faith!

Barbara Brown Taylor has summed up this journey so well in this story. It is a favorite of mine and I hope you like it too.

"Several summers ago, I spent three days on a barrier island where loggerhead turtles were laying their eggs. One night while the tide was out, I watched a huge female heave herself up on the beach to dig her nest and empty herself into it while slow salt tears ran from her eyes.

Afraid of disturbing her, I left before she finished her work but returned next morning to see if I could spot where she laid the eggs. What I found were her tracks. Only they led in the wrong direction. Instead of heading back out to sea, she had wandered into the dunes, which were already hot as asphalt in the morning sun.

A little inland, I found her, exhausted and all but baked. Her head and flippers caked with dry sand. After pouring water on her and covering her with sea oats, I fetched a park ranger, who returned with a jeep to rescue her.

As I watched in horror, he flipped her over on her back, wrapped tire chains around her front legs, and hooked the chains to his jeep. Then, he took off! Yanking her body forward so that her mouth filled with sand, and then disappeared underneath her as her neck bent so far I feared it would break.

The ranger hauled her over the dunes and down onto the beach; I followed the path that the prow of her shell cut in the sand. At the ocean's edge, he unhooked her and turned her right side up again. She lay motionless in the surf as the water lapped at her body, washing the sand from her eyes, and making her skin shine again. Then a particularly large wave broke over her and she lifted her head slightly, moving her legs slightly as she did.

As I watched, she revived. Every fresh wave brought her life back to her until one of them made her light enough to find a foothold and push off, back into the water that was her home.

Watching her swim slowly away and remembering her nightmare ride through the dunes, I noted that it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down." [Taylor, Preaching the Terrors].

Today is Trinity Sunday. Today, we are in God's wheelbarrow. Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

May your ride be bumpy and frightening and thrilling and breathtaking.

The one who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews said: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God."

Fearful indeed.

But where else shall we go?

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