

Belief

What is it we believe, my daughter asked last week.

I gave her an answer -- but I should have told her a story.

Like the story Bishop Willimon tells of a time when he was the campus chaplain at Duke, the very prestigious southern university in North Carolina.

It seems a very bright student decided to take a year off after her sophomore year to work with the poor in Haiti and on learning of this, her parents jumped in the car and made a beeline for the campus to confront the school chaplain.

The girl's parents were beside themselves.

She would ruin her future.

She would fall behind in her studies.

All they had hoped and dreamed for her was now at risk, and, they wanted to know, what kind of cult had snatched their little girl away to embark on such a foolish mission?!

The chaplain listened patiently, head down, eyes closed, in deep thought.

When the parents had finally exhausted themselves, the chaplain continued his silence, then suddenly clapped his hands together saying: "I think I've got it!"

You folks are Episcopalians, aren't you?

"Why, yes," they replied.

"Did you then have your daughter baptized?" he asked.

"Of course, as a child," came the reply.

"That's it!" he said.

"Sometimes --- these things take!

What is it that we believe?

A worthy question, especially on this day when we celebrate all of the saints, as we prepare to baptize nine members of one family.

Today, we get to hear what we believe.

St. John says it so well in that short but astonishing reading: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are!"

So says St. John, and if you listen carefully, what is made crystal clear is that it is not we who pursue God, but rather, it is God who pursues us.

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are!"

I think that undergrad encountered this pursuing God, and in her joy decides to go where God sends her.

And you, you saints of God, you too, have caught a glimpse, a hint of that which is just beyond your grasp, that inkling that says you are made for so much more than a full stomach or a healthy bank balance – that these days of our lives that speed up with every passing year, are not the sum of our existence, but that something intimate, yet beyond, is hunting us down with the promise of so much more than we can ever imagine.

It's not you who has gone searching to find this great beckoning, this marvelous beyond; the call to that undergrad to travel to Haiti doesn't come from herself, anymore than the nudge you have to visit the sick or feed the hungry or clothe the naked or spend your money on such things comes from you.

It is God who has been and continues to be and always will be the instigator of such foolishness, this foolish God who is constantly on the hunt for us.

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

A priest spent years with the Masai, a herding people who travel between Kenya and Tanzania.

That priest travelled with and among the Masai tribes and he recounts the night when the elder he became friends with discovered that he himself was being pursued by God.

It began as a conversation about the word "belief."

The elder said that the Swahili word chosen by the priest was the wrong word.

The word in Swahili means literally "to agree to."

The elder said to the priest that "'to believe' like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance.

Only his eyes and his fingers took part in the act.

Instead, the elder continued, for a man really to believe is like a lion going after its prey.

His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey.

His legs give him the speed to catch it.

All the power in his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to the neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills.

As the animal goes down, the lion envelopes it in his arms, pulls it to himself, and makes it part of himself.

This is the way a lion kills.

This is the way a man believes.

This is what faith is.

The priest looked at the elder in amazement.

But the old man was not finished yet.

We did not search you out, Father, he said to the priest.

We did not even want you to come to us.

You followed us away from your house into the bush, into the plains, into the steppes where our cattle are.

You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and our people to find him.

But we have not done this.

We have not left our land.

We have not searched for him.

He has searched for us.

He has searched us out and found us.

All the time, we think we are the lion.

But the lion--- is God." V. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 43.

What do we believe?

What is the heart of our faith?

It is simply this: that before we were, God is; and because God is, you are loved; now and forever and ever, amen.