

What a Difference a Word Makes

When I was practicing law, I represented a couple whom the federal government was investigating.

The investigation had to do with this couple making a series of bank deposits of less than \$10,000 in cash, which can be a crime if the government thinks you're trying to avoid reporting requirements.

You see, deposits of more than \$10,000 in cash means you have to fill out a government form and give some information about yourself and the money.

Under \$10,000, no form.

What this case boiled down to was whether the wife told the bank teller that the money was "for" her wedding or whether it was "from" her wedding.

The way the case had developed, if the money was "for" the wedding, they were in trouble.

If the money was "from" the wedding, all was well.

A single word, "for" or "from," meant the difference between a jail sentence and life as usual.

I was thinking of that case this week as I read Paul's letter to the Romans.

We get Paul's letters in English, which is sensible because very few of us here are fluent in Greek.

But because of that, one mistranslated word can make all the difference in what Paul has to say.

This is not a surprise.

Travel abroad and you're likely to come home with a whole slew of amusing signs and menus posted by folks whose English almost gets there, but not quite.

Like the Cocktail lounge in Norway that says: LADIES ARE REQUESTED NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN IN THE BAR.

Or the doctor in Rome who claims to be a SPECIALIST IN WOMEN AND OTHER DISEASES.

Or the Acapulco hotel sign that assures all guests that THE MANAGER HAS PERSONALLY PASSED ALL THE WATER SERVED HERE.

Yes, a single word can make all the difference.

And so it is today.

While our reading has Paul preaching about "belief IN Christ;" that phrase is better translated (from the Greek) as the "belief OF Christ" or, even closer to the original meaning, the "FAITH OF Christ."

Now you may be thinking, there's the lawyer in him, just nitpicking away!

And I will protest: Not So!

In fact, mistaking "in" for "of" may be responsible for more harm to the Christian message, more division among Christians, and more animosity from those who do not have faith, than any other single word in history.

Allow me to explain.

To believe "in" Jesus; to have faith "in" Jesus focuses on the person doing the believing.

If that's where we're looking for our definition of faith: no wonder so many see belief as nothing more than a subjective feeling that lines up with each person's prejudices and feelings and particular circumstances.

What we're left with is not belief or faith in the one true God revealed in Jesus, but faith and belief in millions of gods: yours, mines and everyone else's.

Among our Evangelical friends, this highly personal view of faith is the cornerstone.

Your acceptance of Christ as your personal savior, however you might personally conceive that Christ, is all you need to be a Christian, many of them say.

And so we have purported Christians who actually insist, with a straight face, that social justice has nothing to do with Christianity.

We have Christians on the right who insist that our faith is an entirely personal affair that has no bearing on the poor and exploited of the world; and we have those on the left who peddle all kinds of psycho-babble of the "I'm Okay -- You're Okay" variety -- and pass that off as the gospel message.

When you think about it, none of this is surprising -- because if belief IN Jesus is the touchstone -- who's to say your belief is any more or less authentic than mine?

But if our faith is a wholly subjective affair, then what's the point of passing it on?

What's the point of saying anything about it, since we may only offend or embarrass?

So we say: "Live and let live!" as we shuffle down the road of our lives.....

Which gets us back to what Paul actually says, in Greek.

Just like the Norwegian bar ought to have advised women not to BRING children into the bar (instead of not HAVING them there); just as the Acapulco hotel manager might better have INSPECTED rather than PASSED all the water we are drinking, just so, a right reading of Paul brings us miles closer to the truth of our faith.

It is the "faith of" Jesus that is the saving truth.

Remember the gospel story when Jesus is teaching in a crowded house?

People are packed to the rafters and spilling out onto the street.

If you're not already inside, you're not getting in.

Except, here comes four guys walking up the street, desperate to get their paralyzed buddy in front of Jesus, so desperate that they grab their friend, hoist him and themselves up onto the roof, tear a hole in the roof, lower their friend with ropes tied to his mat, and plop him down right in front of Jesus.

Jesus looks at the man and says: "Friend, because of their faith, your sins are forgiven."

In that encounter, Jesus is saying plainly what Paul today is saying plainly, if only we get the *Greek* right.

It is the faith of Jesus that saves us; his faith that takes him from eternity into the womb of an unwed teen, onto the dusty streets of a backwards nation, into the lives of ordinary folks, like you and me, teaching us what *God* wants us to do, and then living it, living it right to the end, forgiving his enemies and reconciling the whole world - while wearing a crown of thorns - nailed to his throne, the cross.

By that faith, by his faith, we are saved; not by our own puny faith, but by the faith *OF* Jesus, we are saved!

One theologian speaks of the last temptation and the second to last temptation facing modern Christians.

The second to last temptation is to insist that faith *IN* Jesus trumps the faith *OF* Jesus.

That insistence takes what is objective and difficult and true (namely, the faith *OF* Jesus) and subordinates it to that which is subjective and easy and timid (our faith *IN* Jesus): all in the name of Christianity.

As we see in today's gospel, the most seductive temptations aren't about money or sex or greed.

The most seductive temptations have us doing the devil's work when we all along think we're doing the work of *God*.

The devil quotes scripture with Jesus nose-to-nose, verse for verse.

It is not a new problem.

In the powerful story entitled "The Grand Inquisitor", the problem of doing the devil's work while holding it out as *God's* work is laid bare for all to see.

In the story, Jesus is once more among us, in the flesh, in Spain, during the Inquisition, when the church tortured and killed its opponents.

"He comes softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone recognizes him.

The people are irresistibly drawn to him, they surround him, they flock about him, follow him."

"An old man in the crowd, blind from childhood, cries out: "O Lord, heal me and I will see you!"

And, as it were, scales fall from his eyes and the blind man sees him.

The crowd weeps and kisses the earth under his feet.

Children throw flowers before him, sing and cry 'Hosanna!' 'It is he!' 'It is he!'"

"He stops at the steps of the Cathedral, at the moment when weeping mourners are bringing in a little, open, white casket.

In it lies a child of seven, the only daughter of a prominent citizen.

The dead child lies hidden in flowers.

'He will raise your child,' the crowd shouts to the weeping mother."

"The priest, coming to meet the coffin, looks perplexed, and frowns, but the mother of the dead child throws herself at his feet with a wail.

'If it is you, raise my child!' she cries, holding out her hands to him."

"The procession halts, the coffin is laid on the steps at his feet.

He looks with compassion, and his lips once more softly pronounce: 'Little girl, arise!'

And the child arises.

The little girl sits up in her coffin, smiling with wide open, wondering eyes, holding the bunch of white roses they had put into her hands."

"At that moment, the Grand Inquisitor passes by.

He sees it all.

The coffin.

The shouts.

The little girl.

And Jesus is arrested.

Taken to jail.

Where the Grand Inquisitor himself demands: 'Why have you come to trouble us?'

'Tomorrow you will be burned at the stake as the worst of the heretics!'"

"The Grand Inquisitor continues:

'You give people freedom, but all they really want is bread.

All they really want is security.

They want to worship you, not follow you.'"

"At the end, he saw that the prisoner had listened intently all the time, looking gently in his face.

The old man longed for him to say something, however bitter and terrible.

But he approached the old man in silence, and softly kissed him on his bloodless, aged lips.

That was all his answer.

The old man shuddered.

He went to the door, opened it, and said to him, 'Go, and come no more ... come not at all, never, never!'"

"The prisoner went away."

Such is the way that belief IN Jesus can be twisted and mangled in ways that the faith OF Jesus can never be.

We have seen over countless bloody centuries, in our pitiful history of division among those claiming Christ, the religious wars and agonies that follow belief IN Christ, because belief IN Christ is all about us: whereas the "faith OF Christ" is all about God.

As the Grand Inquisitor knows, we care mostly about bread; which is precisely why we need the faith of the One who can stare Satan in the face and declare:

"People don't live by bread alone."

That is the second to last temptation.

The last temptation, for we moderns, is to conclude that since belief in God is so individual, so private, that we ought never speak about Jesus: that we ought never spread the good news.

Why offend the next fellow who may believe, but believe differently than I?

Why talk about my personal faith with that self-proclaimed atheist when his atheism is as individual and personal as my belief?

Today, we move in communities that are not much different from the communities Paul moved in, and he wondered, out loud, as he saw so many searching, yet still lost:

"[H]ow can people call for help if they don't know who to trust?

And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted?

And how can they hear if nobody tells them?

And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it?" Rom 10:14.

We, my friends, stand in the long line of those who have been sent to do it!

Look to the faith of Jesus, the faith that never waivers, that always seeks to know -- and then to do -- the Father's will, the faith that trusts that God is, that God is faithful, that God has already brought us home.

If you look to the faith OF Jesus, you will find a freedom beyond all imagining, a joy that is immovable, and a peace that passes all understanding.

May it be so.

+amen