



Saint John the Baptist Episcopal Church
The Rev. Michael Carroccino, Priest-in-charge

Rev. Carroccino's sermon for Sunday, August 2, 2015 – The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Readings: Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 ▪ Psalm 78:23-29 ▪ Ephesians 4:1-16 ▪ John 6:24-35

One of my favorite parts of being a priest is that people don't hesitate to ask me some of the greatest questions. My perennial favorite is, "What do Episcopalians believe, anyway?" – to which I always respond, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth..." When I teach Confirmation and Newcomers' classes, I especially enjoy the moment when people realize that – even though they learned quite a bit – they are leaving with more questions than when they arrived. Coming as I did from a spirituality with a rigidly literal approach to both the Bible and everyday morality, I like to tell people that I traded certainty for faith.

When I arrived in the Episcopal Church, I was delighted to find a group of people who weren't reactive or insistent about their beliefs, and yet seemed somehow grounded in faith, at ease with their fallibility; and even sometimes at ease with their authority. How is it that a denomination that is notorious to outsiders for being wishy-washy about doctrine and morality can present such a solid faith?

Often when people ask me questions about beliefs, what they are really asking about is belonging. In our culture, we have a thousand unconscious litmus tests to sort and process the people we encounter. Based on a few sentences about morality or health care or the economy, we place them into a category. This is a natural function of the human brain, and has its uses, but when applied to ideology it becomes divisive rather quickly. So when people in Inquirer's classes ask me about predestination or transubstantiation or gay marriage, they are not really looking for information, they aren't preparing for a dialogue: they are feeling around in the dark for barriers to entry – things they might trip over in trying to become part of the community. They want to know if the church has a place for them. They want to know if they belong here.

I once heard of a man who found his way into an Episcopal church and quickly became very involved. He showed up every week, he joined the choir, he starting making friends in the community, and then one day he abruptly disappeared from the church. No one could figure it out, and for weeks they wondered what had happened. A few months later he sent a letter to the church in which he described his biggest problem with the church: "I just wanted someone to tell me what to believe." My first thought – based on my experience with the wonderful people of our church – was that he must not have asked very many people! Or then again, perhaps he did.

You see, one of the challenges of Anglican spirituality is that we turn traditional notions of belief on their head. For centuries in Western culture we have followed a very imperialistic pattern when initiating others into a community: first they need to believe like we do, then they need to behave like we do, and finally they belong. But as the hegemony of Christianity in American culture declines, the church is beginning to rediscover a much older form of evangelism that is exactly backwards in comparison. Belonging comes first.

When I first read the gospel passage for today, the line that jumped out at me was: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent.” Conditioned as we are to the idea that belief comes first, this seems a no-brainer, but then we have to ignore the context of the statement. Jesus just sat everyone down and fed them. They were invited; they belonged -- not because they professed some particular creed or oath, but simply because they were hungry. At our best, that’s our criteria as well: hungry, weary, heavy-laden. The Body of Christ finds itself in that very invitation.

If you ask me, most discussions about belief are really about belonging. I say that because our sense of what is meant by the word believe has become quite anemic compared to what Jesus is talking about in the gospel today. For us, belief has come to mean little more than intellectual assent: if we agree that something is true, we claim it as believing. But there is a much richer form of belief: the transliterated Greek means something akin to ‘enacted faith,’ and the older English links belief to desire and to love. Belief starts to mean something that we strive toward rather than simply agree with. And this is why belonging has to come first: to take on a discipline of enacting faith in a community setting implies a deep trust, because doing so is a vulnerable exercise, prone to insecurity and error. So when people ask me about belief, they want me to agree with their take on the matter; not because they have cornered the market on orthodoxy but because they need a fellow sojourner, a whole bevy of them in fact.

So belief is what we’re about here, it’s what we’re *doing* in this place today: we’re believing together. We don’t have to agree, but we do have to act in faith. So when we shake hands at the Peace in a few minutes, we are believing our way towards a world where there truly is lasting peace. When we confess our sins, we are believing our way into the forgiveness that Jesus mentions so often. And when we put our offerings in the plate and send them up to the altar, we are believing our way into redemption and transformation, we are putting our lives on the line in the faith of resurrection. Every time we do these things, we are thumbing our noses at the destruction, strife, and death that surround us. We are insisting that we belong – to the Kingdom of God and to one another. And that happened long before we believed it.

This belonging is the bedrock of our faith and the of the mysterious groundedness I encountered in those first few months of my life as an Episcopalian. In a culture that so often looks for intellectual assent, it is perhaps one of the greatest virtues of our church that our doctrine is not an abstract set of assertions; our primary source of doctrine is instead the

prayers that we share together each week as we break bread. When someone asks you what Episcopalians believe, tell them we believe we're hungry, and that God feeds us.