

Trinity Sunday, Year B
May 27, 2018

Believing in Jesus

In the name of the living, loving God. Amen.

We're having a terrible problem in my house right now
and it all boils down to belief.

I may be the only one who sees it that way, but it's true.
I'm certain I'm right.

The problem you see comes down to tired parents
and a kid who can't fall asleep at night because she's worried,
worried about carbon emissions, endangered animals,
ghosts, and tapeworms.

My husband, Joel, draws on limitless stores of patience
and extensive logic and rational which she seems to love,
in an effort to help our daughter understand and cope with this world in which we live.

And yet, we still have a child who stays up far too late, night after night,
brain going a million miles an hour,
thinking about all of the potentially scary, creepy,
or frightening things she has read about that day.

This is where **belief** comes in,
she doesn't **believe** us when we say tapeworms or ghosts won't get her in her sleep,
that those things are either in her imagination or out in the world,
but not actually a threat **in her bed**.

She **believes** the ghosts and tapeworms and pollution,
or at least the worry over these things are worthy of her full attention,
even at the expense of a good night's sleep.

We are at a stalemate and everyone is staying up too late.

Even if I can get her to say:

"I believe you. I believe the ghosts and tapeworms don't actually live in my bedroom.
I should stop worrying and just go to sleep."

It would only be an intellectual assent of my proposition.
It wouldn't be true belief; UNLESS she changes the way she lives her life.

But, there is another level of belief that is much more visceral.

There is belief **IN** someone, which is way past intellectual assent.

To **believe in** someone puts you in relationship with that person
in such a way that you are trusting them with your life.

I imagine that's how a bedroom full of worry feels at night to an anxious child
and she isn't ready to **believe in** me at all.

Maybe when she's 8 or 9...

I think that's what's going on between Jesus and Nicodemus
in this fascinating dialogue from John's gospel.
There is clearly a misunderstanding around "belief."

But to back up a moment, let me tell you more about Nicodemus.
He appears only three times in the entire Bible
and all three appearances are in the gospel of John
with this scene being his debut.
He is a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin,
which means he is a ruling member of the Jewish elite in Jerusalem
tasked with enforcing Jewish law.

In this scene, he comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness seeking wisdom
either because he has to come in secret or he's avoiding the crowds.
We can't be sure.

Regardless of his motives, Nicodemus doesn't want to be seen
and he is taking a big risk simply by coming.

In the immediately preceding verses,
Jesus overturned tables in the Temple and cast out the moneychangers.
Jesus is not in good favor with the Pharisees right now
and that makes the timing of Nicodemus' visit all the more interesting.

Jesus' behavior in the Temple that day irritated most of the Pharisees,
but not Nicodemus.

For Nicodemus it was captivating somehow and made him want to find out more.
So, he comes to Jesus in secret and they begin talking.

Their conversation is lengthy for scripture,
which gives us the opportunity to learn about both of these men.
It's also very playful, bordering on sarcastic.
They are messing with each other, speaking nearly in riddles.

Nicodemus says:

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher from God;
for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus answers:

"No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus:

"How can anyone be born after having grown old?
Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus:

"No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.
What is flesh is flesh. What is Spirit is spirit.
Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'"

Nicodemus: How can these things be????

I'm not sure they are participating in the same conversation at all.

The last thing Nicodemus says is "How can these things be??"

You can just hear the exasperation in Jesus' voice as he responds:

"Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things???"

It's like the ridiculous conversations I have with my daughter at 10pm

when she won't go to bed because of the ghosts and the tapeworms
and we are talking in circles and getting nowhere.

How do you not understand the words coming out of my mouth? Jesus is asking.

Jesus is on a roll and keeps right on going with a lecture.

"We speak of what we know and have seen;
yet you don't even believe that.

If I have told you about things right here on earth and you don't believe,
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

He adds for emphasis, "the Son of Man must be lifted up,

that whoever **believes in** him may have eternal life,"

but why he even bothers to say that I don't know
because clearly the dialogue has ended

and we hear nothing more from Nicodemus who has vanished.

This is just the beginning of Nicodemus' story.

In chapter seven, Nicodemus appears briefly

when he comes to the defense of Jesus in the presence of the police and other Pharisees.

There, Nicodemus appears both sympathetic and interested in Jesus' teaching.

Nicodemus, like Jesus and each of us, is clearly on his own spiritual journey

and through these small glimpses, we can see his faith develop and grow.

He has moved from the know-it-all teacher

who comes under the cover of night asking many questions

to a public authority figure willing to intercede on behalf of Jesus
out of empathy and concern.

The last time he appears is in the final scenes of the gospel after Jesus has died.

Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimathea,

and together they take Jesus' body down from the cross,

wrap his body in linens with a hundred pounds of spices,

according to Jewish burial customs,

and lay him to rest in the tomb.

What a powerful act and statement of love and adoration.

Maybe Nicodemus popping in and out each time a little changed,

a little further along his own spiritual journey,

is a scriptural example of our own journey?

He moves from the curious questioner,
to the skeptic traveling under the cloak of night
to someone who hides his spiritual growth from others,
to someone who eventually is keenly interested and publicly passionate about his belief.
He moves from a place of belief to **believing in Jesus**.

Nicodemus finally, by the end of the gospel, at the burial of Jesus
reached that visceral level of belief that was way past intellectual assent.
By this point, Nicodemus **believed IN Jesus**
and that put him deeply **in relationship with Jesus**.

Where are you in your journey of belief?
Do you identify with Nicodemus?
Are you somewhere along this trajectory of skepticism,
Somewhere between belief and **belief in Christ**?
If so, you are in good company this Trinity Sunday. That is an okay place to be.

The beautiful thing about being on your spiritual journey in community
is that we aren't at the same place at the same time.
I was speaking just the other day with someone
who is feeling like their faith is fairly empty at the moment,
and I encouraged that person to be here anyway.
The conclusion we came to together
is that not everyone is out of faith at the same time
and that is part of being the body of Christ,
being sealed together by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit moves through the community and as this person said to me,
"I guess seeing the Spirit made manifest in another person
can bolster your own faith"
even when it is feeling dried up and empty.
You just never know.

Perhaps the challenge for us in community is to **believe in** one another,
not to simply believe each other.
That is a way in which we can hold onto faith when we feel we have none
or when we feel we have lost sight of our faith.

And so I ask you, **in what do you truly believe**,
and how are you willing to show that you love for that belief?