



SUNDAY SERMON

Faithing It

Friends, there's no easy way to ask this question so I'm just going to ask it... Are you a night time Christian? A Christian who would rather not be identified as a Christian in the light of day – where others might see?

I ask this question with no judgment or condemnation intended; I ask this question simply because it's a question worth asking.

Are you/ Am I/ Are we night time Christians? A people not willing to profess a Christian identity for fear... well for fear of what?

Fear of rejection – Maybe.

Fear of ridicule – Perhaps.

Fear of Alienating those of other faiths – Probably; Christian privilege is a real thing in America – even still the irony of this fear is unavoidable.

You fill in the blank. What's your big Christian fear... I bet there's as many fears as there are people here this morning.

I've talked to plenty of Nighttime Christians, also - Almost Christians, Wondering Christians, Used to be Christians, Modern Christians, even a few Post-Modern Christians and many of them share something in common– that try as they might they just can't wrap their mind around the whole business of Jesus. They confess to me pride-fully, other times sheepishly, that they don't really believe all the things they've been told they have to believe about Jesus.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who has heard this before. Many of you have heard these words. Many of you have said them. I get it – for many, being a nighttime Christian is the only religiosity that makes sense – it's a way to live an authentic faith; A faith that is comfortable in dim lighting where one can't see all the cracks.

But what these nighttime Christians don't yet realize is that their problem isn't really with Jesus, their problem is with the word believe.

There's a school of people who think that John 3:16 is the cliff-notes verse of the Bible. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" As a child this was the one verse I memorized – nowadays I'm more convinced that if I had memorized the Genesis verse "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing"- I would've had a greater handle on what God was up to all those years.

continued

DATE

Lent II

Sunday, March 8, 2020

PREACHER

The Rev. Amy Molina-Moore

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Instead John 3:16 is the marquee verse. You've seen the posters at football games. You've seen the sweaters – one of John's friend's girlfriend had such a sweater and I remember the shiver of fear that went down my spine when I saw it.

There's so much wrong with taking this verse out of context; there is so much wrong with pointing to this verse as the summation of the Christian faith. Even still, the worst part of this John 3:16 mania is that people don't even understand what the verse is really about.

The crux of the verse is "believe." Can you believe in Jesus? – this for many is the heart of Christianity. This, for many is the part of the faith that they struggle with the most. Try as they might – they're not sure they can believe.

We get the word believe from the Greek word *pisteuo* – a verb that would best be translated as *faithing*. Already you see the problem – *faithing* is not a grammatically correct word. In English *faith* isn't a verb, it's a noun – put another way we don't do *faith* in English, instead we possess *faith*, that is unless we don't.

So the translators needed to find a verb that would work where *faithing* wouldn't. The early translators had options – options that have changed over the centuries in their meaning but not their usage.

In her seminal work, *Christianity After Religion* – Diana Butler Bass explores how the word "believe" entered our religious lexicon. She uses the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith who in his exploration of the etymologies of the terms *faith* and *belief* learned that at one time these two words overlapped in their meaning.

We modern Christians are in the unfortunate position of using the word 'believe' as the hallmark of faithfulness without realizing that the notion of 'believing' has undergone a transformation that has had an unprecedented negative impact on Western religious life.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith explains the transformation in beautiful prose this way: "The affirmation 'I believe in God' used to mean: 'Given the reality of God as a fact of the universe, I hereby pledge to [God], my heart and soul. I committedly opt to live in loyalty to Him...' Today the statement may be taken as meaning: 'Given the uncertainty as to whether there be a God or not, as a fact of modern life, I announce that my opinion is 'yes.' I judge God to be existent.

See how different this is? Bass summarizes the learning for us this way. "Belief was not an intellectual opinion. Belief had nothing do with one's weighing of evidence or intellectual choice. Belief was not a doctrinal test. Instead belief was more like a marriage vow – "I do" as a pledge of faithfulness and loving service to and with the other." She goes on to say "In early English usage, you could not hold, claim or possess a belief about God, but you could cherish, love, trust in, or devote yourself to God."

To Believe in God is not about conceptually rationalizing whether God makes sense or doesn't to you – that's not what Jesus was inviting Nicodemus to and that's not what Jesus is inviting you to do. Jesus is inviting you to do some *faithing*. *Faithing* is living, loving, trusting that there is a light that shines brighter than any darkness. *Faithing* is behaving in ways that respect the dignity of every human being. *Faithing* is cherishing the promise, the hope that resurrection is on the other side of death.

Next time someone asks you "How you can believe such things?" Feel free to say, "I'm not sure what I believe, I'm *faithing* it." Amen.