

Proper 16A; Matthew 16:13-20
The Rev. Devon Anderson
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Each year in its appointed lunar month, Muslims across the world observe Ramadan. Ramadan marks the time that Allah, or God, is believed to have given the first chapters of the Quran to the prophet Muhammed in the year 610. During Ramadan, observant Muslims fast during the day, from sun-up to sundown. The practice relates to the second chapter of the Quran: “O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may develop God-consciousness.” (Quran 2:183). Every day’s fast is broken after sundown with a gathering and family meal. Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam, a time for constant prayer and attentiveness to the needs of others, a time especially set aside for acts of generosity, charity, and justice.

Every year, at my request, Gary places a sign on Trinity’s front lawn for the full duration of Ramadan. It says simply: *To Our Muslim Neighbors – a Blessed Ramadan*. The sign was distributed to Christian churches several years ago by the Minnesota Council of Churches, hoping they would be pitched in church yards everywhere across the Twin Cities as a sign of connection, goodwill, and peace. Trinity was happy to oblige.

But not everyone is happy about that sign in our front yard. A few years ago, a family left Trinity because they did not approve. During this year’s Ramadan, I received an e-mail from a neighbor of Trinity whose initial intent was to protest the sign. To his credit, our neighbor stayed in dialogue with me, back and forth on e-mail for several weeks. He just couldn’t understand why a Christian Church would be “promoting” (his words) Islam. And didn’t I think “advancing” Islam was counter to the Christian faith? “What, exactly, do you believe in there?” he asked, meaning, Trinity. I had to hand it to the guy – his was an excellent question. I was very grateful that his inquiry was posed over e-mail and not in-person, so I had time to think about it first and then form my answer. Introvert that I am, I am *never* at my best speaking extemporaneously. For best results, I always need time to chew, think, and consider before responding. It was a golden opportunity, though, a rare opening given freely, and I took it very seriously. His was an honest question and he genuinely wanted to hear an honest answer. “What, exactly, do you believe in there?”

To our neighbor I was able to express that the Episcopal Church is devoutly Christian. We follow the Way of Jesus and we try our best to pattern our own lives after Jesus’ life and example, after his teachings, his acts of understanding and kindness, forgiveness and compassion. The Episcopal Church is, I told him, expansive and generous in its relationship to other religious traditions. We believe there’s one God, and, at the same time, many paths to that one God. The path we’ve chosen at Trinity is Christianity and Jesus. The path is chosen for us at our baptism by our parents, and then we affirm that chosen path as young adults in confirmation, or even later in life as adults. Among all the varied and legitimate paths to God, we choose the Way of Jesus. But choosing the Christian path as the best path for us does not prevent us from recognizing and celebrating other paths to God. While our neighbor didn’t ultimately agree with our theology, with what we believe, I was able to listen to him, he listened to me, and I had the chance to invite him to come check Trinity out. “We like critical thinkers like yourself,” I told him, “and we never profess to have everything figured out. Like all paths to God, he Jesus Way is a path one walks for a lifetime.”

Long after our e-mail conversation had ended, the “what do you believe in there?” question still bounced around in my mind. In this morning’s lesson from Matthew, Jesus himself is the Trinity neighbor, the one who asks the question about what it all means, about what he means to us. In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus and his disciples have just come into the district of Caesarea Philippi trailing miracles behind them: the feeding of the 5000, the calming of the storm at sea, Peter’s short walk on the water, and the curing of the Canannite woman’s daughter. And Jesus has been doing more than healing – he has been teaching too – lessons about obedience to the law, and about the difference between words and deeds, and about reading the signs of the times. During all these healings and teachings, Jesus stops every now and then to quiz his disciples -- to see how much they are taking in, how well they are listening, to see how they have understood him -- he does not hide his displeasure at their consistently low scores.

So it is with this morning’s story – Jesus gathers the disciples around him to take a breath and see what it is they have taken in, what they have understood about all they have witnessed. “Who do men say the Son of Man is?” Jesus asks them. “John the Baptist!” one replies. “Elijah!” “Jeremiah!” The disciples pull the names out of their pockets like interesting stones they have found along the road and hand them over to Jesus for appraisal. I imagine their faces full of expectation. So which is it, Jesus? What is the right answer? But Jesus being Jesus, doesn’t furnish an answer, and instead turns the question back on them. “Who do *you* say that I am?” They who are his nearest and dearest, they who have received the best he has to offer, who are his own people, his family, “Who do *you* say I am?” What is it that *you* believe in there?

Again we’re served a grand performance from Peter. “You are the Christ the son of the living God!” Right or wrong, Peter is always the first one out of the gate, the first one to leave his fish net and follow Jesus, the first one out of the boat to walk on the water, the first to volunteer his opinion on any given subject. I’m not sure if Peter is courageous or just plain reckless, but in any case his answer is apparently the one Jesus is looking for, because in one fell swoop Jesus pronounces Peter blessed, the rock upon which the church will be built, the holder of the keys to the kingdom.

It is almost impossible to squeeze a moral lesson out of this story, to find some model for our own behavior, because the fact is that while Peter’s answer seems to be the right one, it is not really his. “Blessed are you,” Jesus tells him “for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven,” which is kind of like saying, “Blessed are you for an answer that is not really your own.” And we know that Peter not only gives an answer not his own, but his entire discipleship is one of impulsiveness and wrong opinions and perceptions. And we know that when push comes to shove he denies that he knows Jesus at all. About all that can be said in Peter’s favor is that at least he is willing to go first, to speak his mind, and that every time he falls down he gets back up again, brushes himself off and charges ahead. He’s the epitome of the Gospel tune, “We Fall Down,” that reminds us that “a saint is just a sinner who falls down, and gets up.” Peter gets back up, time and time again. While other disciples hang back for fear of giving the wrong answer, Peter risks his own answer, which lo and behold turns out to be God’s answer, and sweet music to Jesus’ ears.

I guess the point, maybe, is that Peter has an answer to “what do you believe in there?” It may not be perfect and may not even be his own wording, but he does have an answer. And the willingness to put himself out there, perhaps, to profess his faith, his belief, to be able to say what it is that he has given his whole life and his whole heart over to is what qualifies him to be cornerstone upon which all that came

after was built. “You are Peter,” Jesus tells him, “and on this rock I will build my church,” against which the powers of death shall not prevail.

I wonder what you would say if someone asked you what you believe, especially if it was clear that how you answered mattered a great deal. “What do you believe, in there?” I’m not talking about a tidy recitation of the Nicene Creed. Belief is emotional, passionate. It’s found deep down in the core of who we each are. Belief is the ideas and promises that we cling to for dear life, the star by which we sail our ships. A guide, a rudder, a tether. Belief is something that is always changing, that defines us, and what we grow into over time.

I have found that my own belief is strengthened by being around people outside of my faith community. My second congregation, St. Clare’s in Ann Arbor, Michigan shared its sanctuary and building facilities with a Reformed Jewish congregation – Temple Beth Emeth. Together the two congregations formed a governing body called the Genesis Board that made decisions for the building and how the two congregations would co-exist peaceably together. During my tenure at St. Clare’s our senior warden, Judy Avery, also served on the Genesis Board during which time a conflict erupted about dedication plaques. The two congregations had recently completed a successful capital campaign for building renovation. As a fundraising strategy the temple had promised donors the privilege of dedication plaques on parts of the building or items within the building that the donors had so generously and freely financed. The church members were aghast – coming from a different culture that shied away from individualizing financial gifts. Both perspectives, both value systems were virtuous, just different, and the Genesis Board was in conflict for several weeks over how to resolve the matter. At the conclusion of the debate, our friend Judy Avery told the congregation of St. Clare’s that her greatest learning about the experience was the “being around Jews makes me a better Christian.” Meaning, having to explain the spiritual beliefs that underpin her actions and perspectives to the Jews on the Genesis Board required that she do her own spiritual work in examining and articulating what, exactly, she believes. “Being around Jews makes me a better Christian.” I never forgot those words.

I have also found that when we are clear about our beliefs – not rigid, but clear and centered and grounded – they serve as reliable and steady guideposts in most every circumstance of our lives. I’ve been suffering from “pandemic fatigue” these past few weeks – like so many of you I am lamenting separation and isolation, pining to be back together with community, and tired of laptop screens. I also have lost my appetite for anything violent – books or Netflix shows, it just doesn’t matter. It’s the Great British Baking Show re-runs, and a re-read of the entire Harry Potter series for me all the way. It’s about all I can handle. I read all of the Harry Potter books as they were published, year by year, in the early 2000s. But it’s something different to read them back to back – able to remember plot threads and character back-stories from previous books that deepen the complexity of the story as one processes methodically through the canon. And at the center is not Harry Potter, but Dumbledore – the head of Hogwarts School, the Jesus character who is steady, grounded, and reasoned, the calm presence amidst the anxious struggle. Dumbledore is the one who sees each person in the best possible light, the one who ultimately gives his life for the salvation of everyone else. The whole series is a bit formulaic, and at the end of each book there’s what I call the “debrief” – where all is revealed, all eyes are opened, and connections are made. Into each “debrief” the great Dumbledore inserts some kernel of truth, a few words of wisdom to frame everything that has just happened. In a “debrief” from one of the early books, he says, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” Far be it from anyone to take their spiritual cues from Harry Potter books, but I guess that’s where we are now. But it

is an essential truth – who we are, how we live in this world, the kind of Christian and follower of Jesus we are is connected to the choices we make in every quotidian aspect of our lives, choices formed from the raw ingredients of our belief.

And finally – what we believe “in there” is what constitutes our life raft when times are hard. It’s been said recently that we’re now experiencing a double-pandemic: COVID-19 and 1619 – the ravages of physical disease and the disease of racism rooted in slavery. This past week you might have read that the iconic George Floyd mural at 38th and Chicago was defaced in the depths of night by a white, UofM medical student. Whatever the reasons, the action was so incredibly mean – so targeted as a violent attack on what has become the very symbol and face of the current movement for racial justice. It went to the core. The original mural was painted by an Episcopalian – a member of St. John’s in the Wilderness in White Bear Lake. Upon hearing about the vandalism, I contacted our bishop, Craig Loya, and suggested he reach out to those in leadership at the George Floyd Memorial site and offer to finance the restoration of the mural, as a gift and profession of faith from the Episcopal Church. He said “yes,” and is working on it. When our lives are unmoored, we always have within us the anchor of our belief – our grounding in who we are and what we hold most dear that keeps us centered and focused. We approach the pandemic as Christians – who believe the health of one is the health of all, that our responsible actions and precautions affect the community and help bring about health and wellbeing. We approach systemic racism as Christians – clinging for dear life to our baptismal promise to “respect the dignity of every human being.” We don’t enliven that belief with our silence or our lethargy or our denial. We honor it, we live it out, with our thoughtful action.

So the next time you bump into someone who asks you what you believe, and all of a sudden you understand that your answer matters a great deal, that even though you do not know who is asking you the question you know for whom you are answering – well, go ahead and just give it a try. You may say something stupid, but then again, you may surprise yourself and say something poetic or inspired. The important thing is to try – not only to say what we believe but also to live what we believe – knowing that we are Peter’s relations and that whether we rise or whether we fall, whether we give the right answer or the wrong one, whether in any given moment we are successful or whether blow it, we are all small, unique, glorious pieces of the one true rock that holds steady throughout the ages, there no matter what, the one thing that against which the powers of death will never prevail. AMEN.

SOURCES:

<http://mnchurches.org/what-we-do/blessed-ramadan>

Exegesis excerpted from: “God’s Rock,” found in **The Seeds of Heaven**, Barbara Brown Taylor, pp.46-51.