

"Believing"

John 35, 41-45

A Sermon for the People of St. Lucas United Church of Christ

Delivered on August 11 & 12, 2018 by Kelly Archer, Pastoral Assistant

How did you first learn about Jesus? Who were your teachers? If you are like me, you had trusted sources. In fact, if you were like me, you learned about Jesus from your most trusted sources, your mom and dad, perhaps your older siblings, or grandparents. (The same sources you trusted to keep you alive!) Maybe you attended Sunday School where trusted members of your community taught you the stories of our faith. Along with those trusted sources you also had trusted resources too, Bibles and picture bibles, songs and this place called the Christian church.

But for the people in our text reading today, they did not have those sources. It's ironic really, because they are the ones with actual, first-person, eye-witness accounts of Jesus' ministry, and yet they are also the ones with a particular type of doubt. The doubt that comes from not *first* encountering Jesus as the King of kings, like we did, but rather knowing Jesus the man, the flesh and blood, and not quite understanding how it is that this guy you know, that kid born in a barn to unwed parents is actually the son of God!

We hear their doubt in the text when they say, "isn't that Joseph's son? Jesus? We know him – how is it that he can say that he's the bread of heaven? They aren't sure about all of this. They are having a hard time believing.

"Believe", the word, the verb, "to believe", appears in the Gospel of John 99 times. That's more times than in all of Matthew, Mark and Luke combined! Believing is therefor an overarching characteristic of John's writings and a theme for his theology.

Something that is interesting to note, is that the Gospel of John is the last of those 4 canonic gospels. Where Mark was written around 45 years after the crucifixion, John is believed to have been written a good 150 years after Jesus died. That's 6 generations later. So while Mark's first audience may have known Jesus or someone who knew Jesus – trusted sources. John's audience was far less connected. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why John devotes so much of this gospel to the need to believe. From the book of John, we get the memory verse, "Blessed are those who believe without seeing". And the doubting Thomas story, a story of believing, is only found in John's Gospel. It has no mention in Matthew, Mark or Luke.

Yep, John loved the word believe, and you know who else does? We do. Apparently. Check it out. The word Believe is a part of the 9.6-billion-dollar inspirational products market. You see it on throw pillows, bumper stickers, jewelry. Even tattoos! I gotta think not every word has its own tattoo flash.

It's a straight forward definition, both in Webster's and as it appears in the New Testament, from the root *pistis*. Webster's definition is "to accept as true, to feel sure of". The ancient Greek translates as "having faith". And we see that for being such an

inspirational word, it really it isn't a holy word in and of itself. Not a sacred term reserved for religious rites and rituals, but rather just a part of speech. As in, "I believe I'll have another cup of coffee." and "I believe it's gonna rain".

And so believing, could go many ways. I mean, there are people who believe Elvis is still alive! That might seem harmless, but there are death dealing beliefs too. There are people who believe the holocaust never happened. People who believe offensive and oppressive racial stereotypes. People who believe violence is the answer. Those are death dealing beliefs, soul crushing beliefs, like believing that your happiness lies in a bigger better house or car, or believing that your solution can be found at the bottom of a bottle. So, it's not really believing that's so sacred and special. It's *what* we believe in.

And here's where return back to John's Jesus. In the text Jesus doesn't just tell us to believe – he tells us **what** to believe. He tells us to believe him when he says that he is the bread of life, come down from heaven. To believe that through him, we may know eternal life and be completely satisfied. All who believe, says Jesus, will never hunger or thirst.

All who *believe*. *Believe*. Notice that Jesus did not say, all who declare. He didn't say all who profess. No. He said all who believe. Believe.

Do you believe?

And this is where that word with a straight forward definition, can get a bit tricky. How do we know if we believe? How can we measure or gauge that? How do we know if that belief is healthy and strong, or if that believe could use a little attention and maintenance? How will we know when our belief has become stagnant, our despite ongoing spiritual practices?

Friends, there are no better teachers on believing than children at Christmas time. Right? Look at that child. She believes she might just see a sleigh up in that December sky! We know our children believe in Santa, not because they inform us of this, but rather in how that belief, informs their life. It changes them! It influences their behaviors. They write letters to Santa, they leave him cookies, they willingly and joyfully turn in before 9p.m. Christmas eve! Their belief is palpable!

Is your belief that Jesus is the bread of heaven palpable? Does it inform your life? Has your life been different since the hour you first believed? If that's too overwhelming, let's just think about this last week. Because a week ago, we gathered here, right here even, and we took communion. We remembered the life of Jesus, and his death too, and then we ate the Bread of Heaven. We drank the cup of eternal life. Did you believe it? And if so, how was your week different because you did that? And if it wasn't... then what was the point?

If we woke up in a parallel universe where you were didn't believe would your life look any different? And again, if not...then why are we here? Those of us here might be tempted to say, that by being here in worship, we are demonstrating our believe. Ok... I see that. But what about on a Monday? How is believing Jesus shown in your everyday life: your life as a parent or neighbor, your life as a coworker or boss? Your life as

someone's spouse, your life as someone's ex-spouse? How is eating the Bread of Heaven shown in how you vote or make purchases? Because I gotta believe that living a life informed by the belief in Jesus, is living a life of compassion and peace, a life of justice and mercy, a life of casting nets wide, and then even wider still.

I guess what I am trying to say, people of God, is that if you believe that it's gonna rain, it means you grab your umbrella. So, if you believe that Jesus is the Bread of Heaven, that ought to mean something too. You should do something about it. Isn't that what our fabulous youth taught us last weekend? To do something? And not out of obligation or task, trust me, no child finds it a chore to bake cookies for Santa. It's a joy to live out our beliefs. It really is. When we are living life's that are shaped by our beliefs, we are living our most genuine and authentic lives. The lives that God intended us to live. In fact, the life God dreamt we would live.

And here's what I believe. I believe that when we are living those kinds of lives, living out our beliefs, following our Jesus, then we don't have to wait on the hour of our deaths to experience eternal life. Rather, we can catch glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven in our midst. In everyday life, even in an ordinary loaf of bread. We find God's Kingdom in miraculous moments of radical sharing and risky compassion. In moments of love, true love, known love— wherein we have no hunger or thirst. And therein lies eternity. May it always be so. Amen.