

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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“Persuasion”

Rev. Susie Maxwell

Let us pray . . .

I don't know about you, but I have cringe-worthy reactions to preachers I've heard either in person or on television yelling, “Do you believe?!” You know, as if yelling at people were a great mechanism for sharing and promoting any kind of good news. Maybe it's meant to be an authentic and passionate question, but it always feels like I'm being set up.

Turns out, that question kinda is a set up, only not in the way we think.

But to back up, suffice it to say, our Scripture lesson for today kinda triggered me around that threatening sounding question when it comes to belief. You see, in my understanding and experience, the heart of Christianity is so gorgeous, and far beyond mere commands of how we should be thinking, that it seems we would want to engage invitational words and questions, not yell at people with questions intended to vet the responder.

But, this is John's Gospel and as I shared last week, it was written to the early Christians, a community who believed in the divinity of Jesus. This was a crazy radical idea and truly must have been ineffable — just too big for words — so perhaps the best way to land on this new understanding of the divine was to press upon belief.

Perhaps where those who followed Judaism understood and valued identity markers, those things that set them apart from others and

signaled their belief system — things like circumcision, animal sacrifices, purity codes, particulars at table fellowship — perhaps *belief* became the new identity marker in this new way of understanding the Divine with the emergence of Christianity.

And so bigger than and beyond the ritualistic aspects of needing to “perform” in order to *maybe* gain God’s favor, came a new understanding that brought about the nearness of God for people through Christ, AKA God’s only Son.

And located in the heart of “Do you believe?” is verse 3:16 “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.

Do you believe?

I’m sure it’s no secret that on a blurry day, I’m not sure what I believe.

And my prayer is that sometimes you feel that way too because it means

you let this stuff get inside and mull over, disturbing your deep self. It's not necessarily fun, but it is how we grow. Complacency has no place in faith.

And so what I want to press upon you is that when you aren't sure what you believe, to always come back to the bigness of Scripture. Scripture is called "The Living Word of God" for a reason because it's bigger than words, because the words embody a spirit that points to something of God.

And that's really what's at the heart of this morning's lesson.

These verses are part of discussion Jesus is having with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a Jewish leader and Pharisee. The Pharisees were experts in the Jewish law. They often clashed with Jesus because Jesus — who was also Jewish — was doing things like healing on the Sabbath and teaching unusual things like *I am in the Father and the Father is in me*; and *no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again*.

Now I love, love, love Nicodemus because he struggled with what he understood and was taught about the divine. He was conflicted because although he was a Pharisee, he also *believed* — along with some other Pharisees — in the divinity of Jesus. He believed that Jesus was from God.

But, Nicodemus and some of his buddies didn't dare confess this out loud because they could be booted from the Synagogue. And we all like to belong somewhere.

And we also all likely know what it's like to have something burning deep inside of us. It can almost make you crazy. Maybe Nicodemus could no longer sleep, tossing and turning so he gets up in the middle of the night to seek out Jesus. He needs his questions answered because there is something about Jesus' presence that has captivated him.

So Nicodemus with all due respect and humility comes to Jesus in the night. In John's Gospel, night and darkness are associated with those

who are unable to recognize Jesus as the divine Son. I read somewhere that going to a teacher at night was also a sign of an ancient mystery readiness for new initiation.

And though he didn't immediately recognize who Jesus was, there was something in Nicodemus that knew there was more to Jesus — and he was ready to approach that “more” that Jesus embodied. Even daring to asking Jesus, “How can these things be?”

And so the verses Beth read for us are a continuation of Jesus explaining to Nicodemus how these things can be.

And as it is in the other Gospels, the pre-Easter life of Jesus is retold from the perspective of the post-Easter faith. Commentators Boring and Craddock write, that John's presentation of Jesus is this Gospel's way of saying that the meaning of Jesus' life is not apparent based on historical and objective research. And that whoever understands the life and

message of Jesus as the presence of God's grace cannot take credit for this understanding.”

In other words, the ability to understand Jesus isn't an intellectual achievement, it is a knowing that *comes from God's Spirit*. And if insight is gained, all there is left to do is to give thanks —

and that's the perspective from which this Gospel is written.

So across my life, I've come to understand that belief isn't a mere matter of declaring belief — and yet, it is. On one hand, Belief in the Biblical sense is bigger than a cognitive exercise. It's more relational and more of an embodiment. And yet, because it comes from God, it's as simple as receiving this gift from God.

The Greeks used the word *pisteúō* for the word belief. And belief in this context means faith coming out of persuasion with the sacred significance being that persuasion comes only from God.

Only the context indicates whether one's belief is self-serving and therefore without a sacredness to it, or the belief is from God's persuasion, God's in-birthing of faith and is therefore sacred.

Perhaps this is where the saying "It's in God's hands" originated from. And this type of faith asks us — again in light of faith being relational — that we have faith because God is trusting us to hold sacred space for the things that come from God.

We don't create the belief — it is something God already did — we don't have to set the stage, but the invitation is ours to enter. Isn't that beautiful?

Because the implications are profound. This is all perhaps another way of saying that by believing, you are allowing yourself to be persuaded by God.

And aren't we usually trying to do that whole faith thing the other way around? We try to persuade God to answer our prayers, give us what we want, keep us from hurting, justify us and so on and so forth.

But by turning around the narrative, and allowing yourself to be persuaded by God, can you make room for the spaciousness of the declaration that *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.*

This is Christianity's way of understanding and explaining within the limited power of words, that God at that point in time was understood to have moved from dwelling in the Temple to dwelling among all of God's people, bringing the nearness of God to everybody and that all who believe — in other words all who trust this truth of God's proximity and access for all people —

In light of all I've said here, this beautiful claim from God isn't a mere matter of the nod of the head and it's business as usual. And while the

notion of belief is in part how John understood Jesus, belief is ultimately an invitation from God to come closer to the things of God, as manifested and understood through the life of Jesus the Christ.

There are many ways to understand and experience the divine or the more-ness of our being. For Christians, what John's Gospel is saying is that the moment we choose to accept or believe that God's present and saving activity has been made near and clear through Jesus the Christ, then that moment is equivalent to "eternal life." So belief brings the movement of life with God into the here and now.

So do you believe?

Do you trust that God seeks communion and union with each of us. Will you allow yourself to fall into a spaciousness that makes room for every single soul — including yours — set up by God from the very beginning?

Do you believe? is not a test or a trick question, it is an invitation to an always has been relationship with God.

Beloveds, as we move toward spring, I'm going to encourage you to write your own Affirmation of Belief. Sarina generously made a video for me to help lead us in this process across spring.

My prayer is that you will take the time to put pen to paper in writing out what you understand about God's nearness.

So as we close, let us share the Affirmation of Belief or Faith created by

Rev. Sarah Are:

Affirmation of Faith

We believe God is love —
Unconditional, constant love.
We believe this love exists for all,
Choosing each and every one of us,
Day after day,

Again and again and again.
We believe that God's love is like a river.
Rivers cannot help but flow toward the sea;
God's love cannot help but move toward us.
We are swimming in it.
We believe that God loved first.
We believe that God breathed life into dust.
We believe that God said, "This is good,"
And because we believe that God loved first,
We strive to build lives that reflect God's love.
May we begin again here.
Amen.