

More Belief; Fewer Beliefs (Part Two)
“It will be done just as you believed it would”
 Reflection 17 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

RECAP from Part One: Back in the early sixteenth century, the church reformer Erasmus pleaded for more belief but fewer beliefs. He supposed that peace and unity in church can only happen when we define as little as possible. Erasmus did not carry the day back then, but in our time more and more people understand what he was saying, and why he was saying it.

NOW: All of this brings up what we mean by belief, that is, what we mean by faith, and that brings us to a remarkable text in Matthew 8:5-13. It's the story of Jesus' healing of a centurion's servant, and it has maybe the finest tag line ever written. To a Roman centurion who was absolutely confident that Jesus could heal his terribly suffering, paralyzed servant, Jesus said, “Go, it will be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that very hour.

Consider again this tag line: It will be done just as you believed it would. Just a little later in Matthew (9:29), Jesus will say to two blind men, “According to your faith will it be done to you.” Matthew looks back on more than thirty years as a disciple of Jesus, and this was one of those truths that always worked out. Matthew by now knows it was a promise not just to the Roman centurion but to everyone, not just about miracles but about life.

We know that too – that things turn out pretty much as we expect them to. This is the power in faith. It really is, as Paul wrote in Romans 1:17, “faith from first to last.” And that's why having faith is so incredibly important. It's why it's so important to imagine good things happening and to put the best possible connotation on things. It's why we are wise to expect good from other people and not bad. It's why we are wise to expect good from our public officials and not bad. We may not always get what we want in life, but far more often than not we will get what we expect. And all this Jesus is saying that day to the centurion, and all this Matthew is remembering as he writes this down a generation or so later. So file that away, and don't forget it.

But now I move on to something else – to what Jesus is saying about faith and where it can be found. It can be found, you see, in the most unexpected places and in the most unexpected people, for instance, in a Roman centurion in whom Jesus found greater faith than anyone in Israel (Matthew 8:10). And what faith is for Jesus evidently is not primarily a set of doctrines. It has less to do with beliefs and dogmas and creeds than with a state of mind, a spirit of openness and receptivity to God, a heart open to miracle and wonder and possibility.

Essentially it's a matter of trusting God and the life that he gives us, and the circumstances of that life. It's the will to affirm life and its goodness despite doubts and difficulties and suffering. And it makes all the difference in our lives. Without it, depression and anxiety are inevitable. But with it, we find the way to happiness, the way

to courage, and the way to love. It's being able to pull back and look at the very real difficulties, even tragedies, we face, sickness in the family, the breakup of a marriage, a setback at work, a sudden loss of one kind or another, a recognition that things are not working out as you once wanted them to, and ask, "What if this were all alright?" What if all of this were calling you to a higher purpose, a larger calling, a greater destiny? And from this kind of trust comes courage, and joy, and unshakeable confidence, maybe even a new world in the morning.

This is what the human soul hungers for, and what millions seek in our time. And yet for centuries now almost every church had dictated what its members must believe on everything from God and Jesus to salvation and sacraments. This has been the definition of faith. Members are told what to believe about baptism, about the frequency and nature of communion, about church organization and authority, about forms of worship and music, about whether Jesus' return will be premillennial or postmillennial, about the great mysteries of free will and predestination, inspiration and atonement. Faith means to memorize and recite doctrine and facts about the Bible. And many churches didn't stop there but went on to insist that their members believe certain things about drinking, gender, sexual orientation, birth control, science and politics.

Layers of beliefs stacked up over layers of beliefs until few could remember the original truths like "God is love," "Blessed are the peacemakers," or "Love your enemies." And the more beliefs that piled up, the more the skepticism as seemingly the very loudest voices in Christianity demanded belief in increasingly unbelievable things, things that don't make sense. And so many, many people today have quit church. They say it makes no sense.

Yet through it all they still seek faith. They seek, in fact, more belief, deeper belief, and fewer beliefs. They seek less talk about God and more direct encounter with God. They want not so much to know about God as to know God. They seek to experience God, to recognize the sacred – the wonder and awe – all around them, to sense the divine flow, to know that God is as close as the air that they breathe, that in God they live and move and have their being, to realize that as they empty themselves God fills them until they are filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. They know that the truths that matter most are basic primal matters – the need everyone has to be reborn, to experience the forgiveness of God and pass it on, to discover in themselves and others the Spirit of God, and then to love and serve others realizing – and this is important, this makes a huge difference – that all people are people. All people are people.

It's basic primal stuff, truths our hearts almost already knew. This is what Paul was saying in his letter to the Colossians – that it doesn't come down to complicated systems of doctrine or complicated codes of behavior. What matters is Christ in you.

Five hundred years ago Martin Luther and his religious descendants, both Protestant and Catholic, carried the day. It was their time. They had a long, long run. But now in the great global spiritual awakening we can begin to sense all around us, Erasmus carries the day – the heartfelt plea for more belief and fewer beliefs, to define as little as possible, to

recognize mystery as mystery, to leave the judgment free on many matters, to understand that truth is complex when it's applied to real life, and that usually when people differ neither side entirely captures the truth.

To this we are called: to peace, to unity, and above all, to a state of being, a spirit of openness and receptivity to God, a heart open to miracle and wonder and possibility. This will be found in the most unexpected places and in the most unexpected people. And together we will work to make a new world.

– Dale Pauls