

The Great Spiritual Migration, PART 1: From a System of Beliefs to Learning the Way of Love (1)

Sermon by the Rev. DWHinkle
P17 Proper 22 Year C October 6, 2019

Scripture: Luke 17:5-10; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Sermon: *“Increase our faith!”* Jesus’ disciples demanded.

But, what is faith? Does “Faith” mean a system of “correct beliefs” as we’ve been taught in our Confirmation Classes? Or does it mean something else?

Things are changing in today’s church. For a number of generations, the word “faith” has tended to mean what a person believes. Beliefs are commonly defined as opinions or judgments about which a person or group is fully persuaded. Faith as “belief” is more of a “what” word: what one believes, usually producing a list of beliefs.

If you turn to the bottom of page 867 in your Books of Common Prayer, you will find the “Articles of Religion” in the Historic Documents section of the Prayer Book. There are 39 “Articles of Religion” which are “beliefs” that our Episcopal forebears decided they believed. As you can see, faith as a system of beliefs is more of a head thing.

But in recent decades, there’s been a Great Spiritual Migration away from an emphasis on a system of beliefs and towards learning a Way of Love. With the guidance of biblical scholars, we’re learning that the Bible’s word for “faith” is not so much about “beliefs” or “Articles of Religion,” but has more to do with “faithfulness.” In other words, “faith” is a “relationship” word about journeying together in community with other people in trust and love. Think marriage. Faith as a trust word makes it more of a “who” word rather than a “what” word: who we trust in, rather than what we believe. Believing in God is so easy that even the demons can do that. But, living a life of love modeled on Jesus Christ, ah, that’s a different matter. Faith as a way of life is more of a heart thing rather than a head thing. (2)

Let’s try a little experiment together. Please turn once again in your Prayer Books to the Nicene Creed on page 326/358. Just recite the first section with me, but instead of saying “We believe in one God” change that to “We trust in one God.” (Say that together) Did you feel the shift in meaning? That small change from “We believe” to “We trust” reflects exactly what we’re talking about this morning. It moves us out of our heads and into our hearts. Such a small but subtle change converts the Creed from a “Confession of Beliefs” into a “Confession of Faith” in the sense of “in whom we place our trust.”

So, what is faith? Do we mean the same thing by “faith” as what the disciples and Jesus knew as “faith”? When we get to know what Jesus’ life and ministry were about, I think we’ll see that St. Paul summed up the answer to what faith is perfectly with the answer he gave in his Letter to the Galatians: *“The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself in love”* (5:6). Paul’s former Pharisee friends wouldn’t have been happy with that. They meticulously followed all the rules and beliefs of their religion. (3)

But Jesus and Paul weren’t denying the beliefs of their tradition by emphasizing faith expressing itself in love; they were faithfully extending it, letting it grow and flow forward. In Jesus’s words, they weren’t “abolishing the law,” but rather they were “fulfilling it” — fulfilling its intent, fulfilling its potential (Matthew 5:17). They were decentering old things — religious rules, temples, sacrifice, hierarchies, “Articles of Religion,” the way we’ve always done it, and the like — and recentering on love. They called for a great, spiritual migration to love, and so must we.

Recentering is one way to talk about it. Another way to see it is as a reversal of emphases, what I call “Reversing the Three Bs.” (4) The pattern has usually been progressing from “Believing” to “Behaving” then to “Belonging.” We’ve been taught what to believe and how to behave. If we get those two right, then we can belong. But for Jesus it seemed to be the reverse: he called disciples to belong with him, teaching them proper behavior, what to do by following him, and what they believed famously trailed behind.

There’s an important quote later in Luke, just after the Last Supper, when the disciples, showing how they were slow on the belief part, were arguing about who’s the greatest among them. Jesus said, *“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”* (22:25-27)

Imagine what would happen if for the next five hundred years, our churches were focused on being ‘schools’ for learning how to love through service. Imagine what the Sunday School and confirmation curricula would be like. Imagine the adult education classes focused on learning how to love like Jesus loved us. Imagine, then, how different the world might be: how differently love-motivated teachers and engineers would teach and design; how differently love-directed lawyers and doctors would seek justice and promote well-being; how differently love-driven businesspeople would hire, fire, budget, and negotiate; and how differently love-guided voters would vote and politicians would act. Imagine!

Thousands of church boards and Vestries will meet the next few months asking a predictable set of questions: How do we pay the bills? What do we do about declining numbers? Why don't young people attend church anymore? How can we find good staff when we can't afford decent salaries?

But sooner than many people think, tens of thousands of church boards and Vestries will meet to ask this question: What can we do to better teach our people to love in a world full of hate? That's not the kind of question you answer in one meeting, but it has the potential over time to help a congregation experience something more meaningful than survival and more powerful than revival — namely, a great spiritual migration from an emphasis on belief toward an emphasis on love.

“Increase our faith!” we cry. And by that we mean, “Jesus, teach us to live in your way of love.” Amen?!

Sources:

NRSB

The Rev. Dr. Paul J. Nuechterlein

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Notes:

1. This sermon is based on the first of three spiritual migrations in **Brian McLaren**'s book “The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian.” I highly recommend this book for all! It is the essential guide to being better Christians for the sake of the world. This sermon draws on Part 1 of the book, the first of three great spiritual migrations that he elaborates. The plan is for my next two sermons to draw on each of the other two migrations in succession.
2. **Peter Enns**' recent book “The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs” is on-target for the theme of this sermon as a whole. The excerpt I printed for the congregation are several pages very helpful to understanding the biblical words for faith, the beginning of ch. 5, “Believing in God: So Easy Even a Demon Can Do It,” pages 92-97.
3. This move of using Paul's language in Galatians 5:6 is from McLaren, The Great Spiritual Migration, pages 44-46.
4. A central idea from **Diana Butler Bass**'s “Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening.”