

²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." ²³ Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!"

Mark 9 : 20 - 25

Eight years ago Hiram College asked me to teach a freshman writing course on the topic of "*Separation of Church and State.*" I thought to myself that THAT did in fact sound like an important thing to explore and understand. There is quite a bit to it, and a long history involved. It lead me to really learn more about two of our Founding Fathers, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom I really came to enjoy and respect greatly. And there is some background to this that we must know.

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, in the year 1750, before the Revolution, it was in fact the LAW that you could have your children taken away, if you did not believe in the Trinity. That might sound crazy, but it was the law, backed up by the colonial government and the Church of England. If you did not believe correctly (as we would say, to be ORTHODOX) you could be punished severely. It was in the face of this kind of law, 25 years later that Jefferson would say *It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.*" He was arguing that people believe many different

things, in fact so many different things, that if you want to be the thought police or the belief police, it is going to be a mess. In fact it was a mess.

We have a picture for us that hangs in the Library of Congress which we will see right now. This is a painting from 1778 entitled “THE DUNKING OF DAVID BARROW AND EDWARD MINTZ IN THE NANSEMOND RIVER.” This is a bit of our history that is usually not mentioned. But in this painting, two Baptist preachers, Mr. Barrow and Mr. Mintz were both preaching illegally in the Virginia Colony without a license. They were seen as a threat to the Church of England, and so a mob gathered, dragged them out of the place where they were preaching, and tried to drown them in a creek. No, I cannot make that up.

We can see with our own eyes. So, if nothing else, we must know that what people *believe* seems to have been a touchy subject at certain times in our history, or at least in certain places. So what I would like to do up until we get to Ash Wednesday, is to have us talk about beliefs, and why they matter, and, how to make sure we don't again drag people to be drowned in a creek. I think we can agree that such things are not a good way to go.

It's interesting that when people join a church, very often they do it by “Confession of Faith.” Confession of Faith is something greatly desired. But sadly in the last 70 years, it has been more and more common for people in churches to have *confusion of faith* rather than a clear understanding of what they believe, how it affects

them, and why it matters. I suspect that folks could go into many United Methodist Churches across the land, as well as into a lot of other brand name churches, and we would find that most people are not only uncertain about what they are *supposed to believe*, but they aren't even sure about what they actually do believe! What am I supposed to believe? I don't know... What do I really believe? I don't know that either...

Why all the confusion of faith? We could point to a lot of possible explanations. On the one hand we are aware today of so many different religions, and variations even within people who claim to be Christian. That doesn't make it easy to figure out. But more than just dealing with the varieties of religion, we must acknowledge that both our world and our society have gone through extreme trauma in the last 115 years. There was WW I, a Great Depression and World Depression, there was WW 2 and a Cold War to follow. From WW 2 we learned of the Holocaust, and 30 years later we learned of the Killing Fields of the Camer Rouge in Cambodia, where another 10 million people were murdered. In the famous 1929 story by Ernest Hemmingway called "A Farewell to Arms," a story about WW 1, there is an American character called Lt. Henry. He is wounded, and he is asked by an English nurse if he is a believer. And he says "Only at night." He cannot believe in daylight, because there is too much inhumanity and suffering.

We have this trauma. But we also have upheaval from science and knowledge. In the last 400 years, the world and what we

believed about it changed greatly. Our ancient Hebrew ancestors believed that the sky was filled with water. Outer space is not a vacuum, it is water. And we live in a little protective bubble with air. Now we know that that is not reality. It used to be that God was the explanation for tornadoes and tsunamis and earthquakes (“Acts of God”). Even 100 years ago, a tornado would hit, and people would ask “Who made it?” The answer was “God.” Today we know that tornadoes come from a cold front slamming into heavy, moist hot air, and the two types of air react badly together. God is no longer needed as the explanation for something like a tornado.

At least one more factor plays a role in us not knowing quite what to believe: for the last 200 years, Americans have had the religion of the revival. For many people, religion has been more about a feeling, about emotion, about crying or falling down or rolling around or something. The question is not, *what do you believe?* The question is *have you felt it?* Have you felt God’s love, have you felt repentance, have you felt your redemption? It is hard to talk about feelings, and especially how different people experience them.

All of these things lead people to far more confusion of faith in our time. People are shaken up, or just plain confused. And to make matters worse, we’ve become a product of our own tolerance. We are America the Melting Pot, we like the idea of different kinds of people coming to make a life together. Because of that we are somewhat forced to say we will not all believe the same way, and

we will tolerate differences. I for one support that. I will never believe in forcing belief upon another, or denying someone the right to question or have doubts. I will never believe in dunking some people in a creek, because they believe differently. But there is something else I will not do. I will never say that all beliefs are of equal value, or that they are all the same, or that they don't really matter. And, more than that, I will never stop trying to share my beliefs about God and life with other people. That is a key part of our problem. We have given up the opportunity to discuss how we see the world, and what we do believe. We just say "Oh well, let it go... I don't want a disagreement or a fight." Like they say, never discuss religion or politics, only the two most important things in life!

So what can we do? Maybe the first thing we can do as a church is to understand that everybody does in fact believe something. Every person has all kinds of beliefs that they have developed about life, some better and some truer than others. Everyone believes in something. Because of that, beliefs should be on the table. We should not be afraid to talk about ours, not in a mean way, not in a harmful way. With love we can talk about what we believe. Everybody believes, so talking about beliefs is not something to fear. We have to get over that.

Step Two: Not only does everyone believe, but everyone's behavior and attitudes of life all stem and sprout from what they believe. If how people behave is important, then it is crucial to

understand beliefs as well. Our actions come directly from our beliefs.

Our Gospel passage from Mark today tells an odd healing story. It is actually a story of exorcism, driving an evil presence out of a person. Some people will say “Yes. This is real.” Others will say, “I don’t know about this exorcism thing. I don’t know if it really works that way.” But the really odd thing here is that Jesus asks a man if he believes, and he says *“I believe; help my unbelief.”* What are we to make of this? I imagine a lot of people have had very different comments on these words. Maybe this should be our prayer. I have not talked about this much in my life, but there has been one constant prayer concern in my life, going back to when I was a young pastor. Through the later 1980’s, the 90’s, the 2000’s there has always been one key thing in my prayer life. It has been this: *Holy One, for my sake, but more for the sake of the people I will serve, help me to know what is right and good and true. Help me to know this so that I can pass it on. I just don’t want to do it wrong. That is my prayer.*

That is still my prayer. I feel a lot of peace about this. In the past, I did not. So I kept praying this same prayer. I would hope that we could all pray that same prayer. As I said during Advent, we are all walking the Way, and it is time for us to walk and talk together. What should we believe? What is right and true and good? We should want to understand this more deeply, because the life we live will flow out from the beliefs we hold. We will spend the next 5 Sundays exploring this a little more. And when

the pandemic is greatly reduced, I hope that we will make the time to walk and talk together, in Sunday School groups, or other groups. You don't have to do it with me. But the hope is that you will do it. We need to know what is right and good and true. Our Maker wants us to work on these things. May God bless us as we walk and talk together. AMEN.