

Trusting the Wheelbarrow
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 4:46–54

One of the first full-fledged celebrities in America was a tightrope walker named Charles Blondin. In the mid-1800s he wowed everyone. Abraham Lincoln even mentioned the Great Blondin in a couple of his campaign speeches.

It's June 30, 1859, and Blondin was attempting what no one had done. He was going to cross the Niagara Falls from New York to Ontario on a tightrope. Some records say a 100,000 people show up!

Blondin asks the crowd if they believe he could cross. Some shout "We believe!" and there he goes: crossing the 1,100-foot expanse, over the churning waters 160 feet below him. He makes it across, no problem. The crowd is abuzz — they just witnessed the impossible.

So, when asked if they believe Blondin could cross blindfolded, the crowd gets into it a little more, "Yes, we believe!" And Blondin does it!

A third time he asks the crowd, "Do you believe I can cross pushing a wheelbarrow?" (remember, it's a wobbly, wooden 1850's wheelbarrow!) But he does it again. People go nuts.

Finally, he pulls out all the stops. "Do you believe the Great Blondin can cross the Niagara (yes! yes!) pushing the wheelbarrow (yes! yes! we saw it with our own eyes!) with a man in it?" The crowd is whipped into a fervor as they chant back, "We believe! We believe! We believe!"

"And now... who will get in the wheelbarrow?" Silence. Crickets.
"Anyone?"

No one in that crowd offered to get into the wheelbarrow.

What does it mean if I say, "I believe in you"? It means I know you. So, I trust you. Because I know you. I have experience and trust and confidence in your character and what you will do.

Now, what does it mean if I say "I believe in U... FO's?" That's different. Right?

Same English word: Believe, but with two very different meanings.

In the Gospel of John believing is everything. John uses the verb Believe 99 times. That's three times as many as all the other gospels put together. And he never uses the noun. In this gospel, believing is always an active action, believing is something you do.

But the original Greek is tricky here! For all you word nerds, now is your moment (everyone else hang in there). The New Testament was originally written in a form of Greek that no one speaks anymore, but we can still read it. There is a verb *pistous* which (translated into English) can mean to believe or have faith.

My problem is that there is often a big difference between belief and faith. Belief is something we have because we found some evidence. It has a lot to do with our thinking brains, it is to cognitively agree to something, right?

Faith is different. At least it is for me. The book of Hebrews chapter 11 says "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith does not require evidence. In fact, if you have evidence, you could argue it's not quite faith anymore. Faith isn't something I do with my brain, but with my heart or soul or spirit, or whatever you choose to call that sacred part of you.

I don't really like that those two words, belief and faith are used for one in Greek. Another valid option would be to translate it as "trust", an English word that I think gets in the combo of head and heart of evidence. And intuition. And it feels much more active to me than either believing or having faith. So this morning, I'm going to say trust instead and you just see how it feels to you.

Let's take a minute and just recall the trajectory of the action so far. Jesus has been to Jerusalem, where he disrupted the buying and selling of sacrificial animals in the temple, next he had a nighttime conversation with a religious leader named Nicodemus, then he left Jerusalem and headed north again, stopping in a place where no good Jewish boy would ever stop (Samaria) and had an extended conversation with a Samaritan woman, which no good Jewish boy would ever do.

He and his followers stick around a couple of days before continuing north, returning again to Cana, which is where his mother goaded him earlier into turning water into wine at a wedding.

Here's the reason I like trust better than believe in this story. It doesn't matter what you believe, if it doesn't change what you do. I truly do not care what your brain thinks about God if it does not affect how you live.

For example, as followers of Jesus, we are called to love our enemies. We can believe we love our enemies. We can even say that we love our enemies. But if our words to people who disagree with us and our actions toward them, do not communicate to them that they are loved then it does not matter what we say we believe.

The Christian life is not about belief, it is about action. And I suggest to you this morning that trust is an action and that trust leads to action. Trust has a purpose because it is relational. This father clearly believes that Jesus might be able to heal his son he thinks Jesus has that power, but it is his trust that makes the difference.

And it's a weird encounter to me. I don't know what to make of Jesus's comment. The lack of tone of voice here is makes it makes it confusing. Either way, it sounds like he might not grant this guy's request. And similar to other stories, he doesn't do the obvious thing. He does not do what the man asks and go see the little boy. Instead, he says, "*Go, your son lives*".

The man trusts the word spoken by the Word made flesh and he goes home. To me, his actions do not sound like they come from a place of belief. That is trust. That is about relationship.

Belief, for me, has always had this black or white, yes or no, on or off quality. Trust feels different than that. Trust to me is like a dimmer switch that can be on a little bit but then get turned up a little bit more.

Which is indeed the pattern that John gives us throughout this gospel. The man comes to Jesus because apparently, he has a little bit of trust. He leaves based on Jesus's word, because now he's met Jesus and has an encounter that we don't fully get full picture of. And when he gets home, he discovers that his little boy's fever broke at the same moment Jesus said, "*your son lives*" and his trust dimmer switch gets cranked up as it does for everyone in his household.

Why? Because they heard the father's testimony and they saw the change in the little boy for themselves.

Friends, if your religion feels stale, or boring, or meaningless, I invite you to find a way to take some action. Believe me, I can wordsmith all day long about the difference between belief and faith and trust. But there's a big difference between thinking and doing; a big difference between theory and practice; a big difference between thoughts and actions.

Thinking is not enough. It's not that it's not enough for God, and it's not enough for us. Simply holding onto a belief is not enough for us because we can only find meaning when we move towards doing something.

Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God? Why? So we get a good grade on a celestial final test? No. Because those actions which stem from our trust in Christ, result in our finding lasting joy and participating in the healing of the world.

I'll say it again. Those actions which stem from our trust in Christ result in our finding lasting joy and participating in the healing of the world.

When we do that, we will be connected to something meaningful. Whoever you are, whatever your age, whatever your abilities may be - you can do something. Our trust in God does not have to be theoretical, it can and should and must be practical.

This is what it means in the Gospel of John to believe. Not to simply think, but to take actions rooted in trust. When people in John believe, they are fundamentally open to what God is going to do - they are climbing in Jesus's wheelbarrow. May we all move past theoretical belief and blind faith into an active life of trust in Christ our light, the one who gives life. Amen.