

Believe

Acts 7:55-60; I Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 4-20-08



It seems that many people are going through difficult times right now. Some are struggling financially and doing all they can to hang on in our days of rising prices for everything from gasoline to a gallon of milk. Others are battling ill health and deadly illnesses and hoping that they will come out on the positive side of life again. Families are struggling to stay together as parents work hard to raise their children with a system of values in a world that sometimes seems increasingly valueless. Just listening to the news on a daily basis is enough to tell people, who are brave enough to raise children in our day and age, that the battle to grow them into responsible adults rages on all sides. Our parents need all the help and support we can give them if they are to raise young people to help us find our way to a better world.

I know that many manage to hang on because they believe that something better lies ahead and that they can face each new twist in life with the hope that there will be a day in which they can see clearly the pathway they are to follow.

I, as do many others, cannot understand how people can go on without having something or someone in which to believe. There are times when people ask me how friends they have, who claim they believe in nothing, can continue on. I don't know.

Sometimes we put our hopes in someone or something that fails and disappoints us. When we discover what we have done and wake up to it we understand that this is part of life and we are apt to take wrong pathways as we move along. We learn to choose more wisely from these failings and learn what it is that is important in life. We understand better how to prioritize matters after we have traveled a few wrong pathways and journeyed down a few dead ends. Our faith helps us out when we discover that we have wandered astray. It reminds us that we always have another chance to move in another, better direction and to find what it is we are seeking.

Jesus lived and moved and had his being grounded in our earthly life. He saw and understood what humans suffered and what it was that brought them joy. He saw in all those around him the same God that dwelt within him. He tried to teach others that we are united by God in one body, ever moving forward.

In our reading for this morning he assured us that in his Father's house there are "many rooms, many dwelling places." There is room for you and there is room for me, there is room for the persons we cannot tolerate and there is room for the ones we hold dear. No matter where we are or who we are on our faith journeys, there is a place for us. We are not to go crazy trying to decide who is "in" and who is "out." That is not our task as humans, for we never truly know what lies in another's heart and soul. Instead we are to leave all judgments up to God who welcomes all of us into God's presence.

If we believe that the Kingdom of God exists among us, and Jesus did tell us this, then we must believe that there is room for everyone to become part of that kingdom. We,

ourselves, begin to become part by examining our lives and discovering where it is we can tweak the way we live to make ourselves better followers and promoters of our faith. This has been the heart and souls of the Christian movement since there have been Disciples of Christ. When we do not understand this we fall short of the goal.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, died for his faith, while asking God to forgive those who murdered him. He was only trying to share the gospel, the good news of Jesus. Those who could not tolerate his views of his faith reacted in fear and decided they had to do away with him. We are told that one of the people who stood by and watched this event was Saul, who would later become Paul.

Saul was an educated man, a person steeped in the laws of Judaism. He persecuted the followers of the “Jesus movement” as being untrue to the ways of their faith. Initially, he could not see the nuances Jesus added to his faith—he could only see the radical departures from the basic teachings and he feared the destruction this would bring to rules and regulations set in stone. There was no room in his God’s house for such deviations from the mean. But Saul’s viewpoint and heart were changed as he learned to believe in the message of Christ. He examined his life and discovered where it was he needed to change. As we all know, he became one of the earliest proponents of the religion that was to become known as “Christianity.” He learned how to believe. Instead of remaining a stumbling block to those who followed the “new way” he worked to become one who tried to make the way smooth for others to follow.

Paul understood, better than some of the earlier followers, that the gospel of Christ was to be shared broadly and with all who showed an interest in it. It was not to be kept locked up and shared only with those who had a proper pedigree. This was quite a learning curve for a man who had credentials. Many believe he was a member of the Pharisees. But his rigid, narrow viewpoint changed when he heard and absorbed what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. His life and the way he lived it changed when he began to believe.

What was true for Paul is true for all of us. When we find ourselves surrounded by disappointment, grief and fear and when we light a candle to dispel the darkness that is gathering around us and when we lift up our hearts to God, the one who dwells above us, within us and among us and turn over the heaviness we are carrying, we begin to find our way. I know we have been told this often. But I know it works when we can let go and let God carry part of our load for us. This takes a lot of practice but, if we believe, even a little bit, we will find some relief from a world that is too much with us grinding us down. When we offer up some of the challenges and pain we carry and let them go to the best of our ability, we often find ourselves in a safe dwelling place provided by our Maker-- a place to which we may return over and over again to find some safety from the ravages of the world; a place in which we are welcomed, a place that is our hearts’ true home. All we need do is believe.

-- Amen