

Proper 9B: Mark 6.1-13

July 7, 2024

The Rev. Scott Walters

“Jesus could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.” Now that’s a strange statement on several levels. The first being, “How is it that unbelief shuts off Jesus’s miraculous powers almost completely?” But a second question is, “What kind of belief—or unbelief, I suppose—are we talking about here?”

There are varieties of belief in a world like ours. Some belief is the result of evidence piling up in front of our eyes. For instance, I’m famously cheap when it comes to irrigation and hate the thought of wasting water. Recently I added a line to the drip system I cobbled together and suddenly remembered how some of my previous Rube Goldberg watering systems have worked. Or not.

Memphis is pretty green right now, but I can remember more than one July when I looked at my lawn and had to admit it was dead. The brittle blades of brown grass were evidence enough. I would assume the grass had died for lack of water. This is a little more theoretical, since running a sprinkler on a yard doesn’t make it green instantly. I can’t watch it come back to life in real time. But there does seem to be a correlation between the life in those spots that get water and the death in those that don’t.

Some of my watering woes have been the result of living in old neighborhoods like Evergreen. Realtors say that the houses in our area are “charming.” Which means that they have tiny closets, few bathrooms, and possibly a single outside hydrant with enough water pressure to run a sprinkler.

So, before my sprinkler upgrade, I was prone to a neurotic sort of disbelief each summer. On the old system, sprouting from that single useable hydrant, was a Y shaped diverter screwed into a timer. So I was forever switching hoses and moving a sprinkler to a different flowerbed or section of the yard.

I could easily imagine turning it on and heading out to eat. But as soon as we got to the car, I'd worry that I hadn't set the timer. Or maybe I had turned the knob to override, which meant the water would run until I remember to go turn it off, which could be Labor Day. So I'd walk back and check it. But getting into the car the second time, I'd worry that I didn't have the diverter sending it to the right hose, so I'd go back to check that. This could go on and on until Ardelle would quite sensibly lock me out of the car so I could watch the watering with my own eyes, and she could go on to dinner and eat in peace.

Aside from working out some of my own horticultural anxieties, these little watering vignettes are meant to highlight some of the ways belief and disbelief can function in our lives. Sometimes we trust what we've seen directly: The grass is dead. Sometimes evidence convinces us: That spot I don't water seems deader than the rest. Therefore I think water helps keep the grass alive. And sometimes our minds can start spinning, because of a pathological doubt that the evidence we have is sufficient: Yes I set the timer, and yes I routed the water to the proper hose, but what if a water main broke as soon as we left the house! The butterfly garden will die, my neighbors will get angry at the eyesore, and they'll slash my tires while we sleep.

So here we have two simple examples of how evidence might lead to a belief, and one description of how a certain kind of disbelief can be annoying if not completely debilitating. And I actually think they might be helpful as we try to tease out some lessons about belief from Jesus's frustrating and frustrated return to his home town. "He could do no deed of power there," we're told, "...And he was amazed at their unbelief."

Often when Christians talk about the need for belief, it sounds like belief is a switch. God has placed evidence in the world that we should be able to assemble into faith in the Christian good news. And when we do, when we become "believers," lights and bells go off in heaven and God showers down prizes on us: eternal life, dental insurance, a pleasant disposition, and a good parking space at Costco.

But if this were so, why didn't Jesus start making the case for faith to those people in Nazareth? I mean, as the second person of the Trinity, with access, perhaps, to mysteries

hidden since the foundation of the world, surely he could have produced one hum dinger of an argument. It seems like he could have convinced them to believe. But he didn't. Why?

Well, Herbert McCabe once put it this way. He said that Christian faith isn't a matter of building up evidence for something until we're convinced that it's true, like observing the connection between dead grass and the reach of a sprinkler. Faith is more like trust. Faith is more like a child's fundamental belief that she is loved by her parents. That love should be a given at the beginning of every child's life. Every child deserves and needs to be loved. In fact, love may be as essential as food and drink, since without it a child might even refuse nourishment. But here's the thing. Love can't be proved. Not conclusively. Love can't be the subject of that child's science fair experiment one day.

And so it is with the Christian faith. There is no shortage of literature out there ready to prove to you beyond a shadow of doubt that Christianity is true. And Christians shouldn't shrink from the questions and challenges of reason or science or any other way that humans explore reality. But the power of faith in our lives is about an abiding conviction that we are loved by the source of all life. And if we believe that we are loved by God there is no telling what our lives might become, just as the potential of a child is unlocked by love.

Surely this is why one name for God is Father, and it's why Jesus said he longed to gather up Jerusalem's people as a mother hen would gather her chicks. If this sort of faith is present and nourished, it's not so much that God rewards us with supernatural powers and a mansion on that heavenly hillside just because we passed a metaphysics quiz. It's that in trusting this love we are able to offer ourselves to the world more completely. The security of God's love means we don't have to pander for the praise of the world or worry that the divine love we depend on will ever be used up. We can give ourselves away to one another and to the world without hesitation, because God loves us without hesitation. Deeds of power will surely follow.

So maybe when Jesus wondered at the disbelief of those hometown people, he saw something in their common life that was a little like the guy who couldn't quite go on to dinner and enjoy himself because he couldn't convince himself that the sprinkler was set properly. They couldn't trust him. They couldn't let go of their need to prove unprovable things, and so

they were stuck. They wanted irrefutable proof that he was more than a carpenter. But the truth of Jesus's identity and the truth of his message could only be tested ultimately in the living. Which means we can't know whether the Christian faith is true without trusting Jesus and giving it a try. The only real test of faith involves trust.

This may sound like bad news. A Catch-22 even. How can I trust something before I know it's true? But the only test for any love in this world is trust, isn't it? Without trust, I can't enter into that loving relationship with a friend or a parent or a spouse or a lover. And until I'm within that love, I can't know whether it's true, and it can't begin to change me. Any scientific proof, any objective evidence for love will only get me so far. Until I begin to believe, love can't really go to work on me, no matter how strongly the lover actually feels.

And the real power of being in any loving relationship is that if I believe that that love is secure, then I'm free to ask all kinds of questions of the world and even of the one who loves me so. We are safe. We have nothing to prove and everything to learn. We can be open to the truth, because we don't have to be right about it. Surely that is the liberation Christian faith is meant to provide. If we believe, at the bottom of it all, that we are loved unconditionally by God, we can live like we have nothing to lose. We can pray and sing and question and argue like we have nothing to prove.

In fact, Herbert McCabe would say that faith in God's love makes us free even to question particular teachings of the Christian church. We can doubt and debate and wonder about even what we say together in the creeds. If we believe that we are loved, if we are present here as trusting members of a loving Christian community, we can doubt without an agenda.

And, who knows. Over time we may even be open to learning what unexpected light that curious doctrine of the virgin birth or the ascension to the right hand of God or the resurrection of the body might actually shed on our lives. We're free to engage such things because we're not using them to build a case or prove a point or win salvation. We're discussing them, if you will, with a few trusted, loving friends over a meal. A little bread and wine, a little faith and trust. That's all it takes. Deeds of power, Jesus promises, will surely follow.