

## Reflection for March 10, 2024 – Belief and Eternal Life

### Inspired by Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

Several years ago, I volunteered as an on-call chaplain at the Royal Inland Hospital in Kamloops. This was part of my pastoral training. I recall one evening being asked to visit a woman and her husband. The later was in very poor health and it was just a matter of time before he slipped away. I remember we had a good visit, the three of us. I recall the gentleman being as cheery as could be expected, given the circumstances. It didn't appear to me he feared death.

When the time came to leave, the wife met me in the hall and expressed a grave concern. Unlike her, her husband was apparently not a believer, and she was really concerned he was not going to heaven. I was a bit taken aback, but I managed to share something I thought to be helpful. I said something like, "The God I know, and love does not differentiate between those who profess to have specific beliefs or otherwise. We are all God's children, and we are all loved and cherished equally. I don't think you need to worry. God will be there waiting to welcome your husband, I'm sure of that."

I offer those comments because I really believe that is the case. One thing that really irks me is someone who professes to know Jesus and love God puts conditions on our acceptance. If I have to behave in a specific way, follow a specific set of doctrines (or rules), pledge so much support and so on in order to be saved or to be accepted into heaven, I'm bowing out. That is just bad theology and in my view manipulation. It really angers me when folks like the woman with the dying husband are led to believe God's love is conditional. That's fearmongering.

Thankfully I wasn't presented with the text Lillian read this morning from John's gospel, especially this very well-known verse. <sup>16</sup> ***"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."***

If my client had presented that verse to me, she may well have remarked, "see, it says everyone who believes. If my husband is not a believer, how can I be assured his soul will be saved?" She has a point, as would anyone who might quote any number passage from the bible.

I think the first question I would have in this instance is, what do we mean by believe? This question continues to be a huge albatross to the church today. We still tend to tell folks what belief is. Worse, we tell them how to believe. Isn't that the case in your experience?

Somewhere in your faith journey, I well imagine you have all been subject to rhetoric that has been shared to try and persuade you who God is and why Jesus died. You have been instructed how you should pray. You may have even been criticized that something in your life didn't work out because you didn't pray hard enough! The church, and organized religion, has a history of telling us what the spirit is, rather than encouraging us find out, letting us experience it for ourselves.

In my time with the dying man on the hospital bed I saw a gentle spirit, a genuinely fair minded individual, someone who cared about his wife and her feelings,

someone who undoubtedly was worried about what might happen to her after he was gone. He was concerned how she would cope. Just because he didn't share with me his favourite biblical verse (if he had one), or want to pray with me said absolutely nothing about his spirit presence, his understanding of God or his "belief". And he didn't have to tell me about his faith journey for me to know he was one of God's own. I didn't need to hear, "I am a believer." I was not there to pass judgement. None of us ever are. Either is God.

Joseph Small asks, "Does the good news proclaim God's gracious love for the world or is God's love reserved for those who have faith?"<sup>1</sup> A faith that is defined with strict parameters.

God's gracious love is there for anyone who wishes to embrace it. That surely has to be the answer. How can it be any different if God is the essence of love, generosity, compassion and forgiveness? And as far as "belief" is concerned, a person doesn't have to "state it" to "be it." I expect numerous folks wouldn't even think of themselves as believers when in fact they are. Belief isn't just measured by one's formal faith statements, those that we might make at our baptism or confirmation or the things we share in prayer. Belief, knowing or better, living God, is evident by how we are in the world.

I know there are quite a number of volunteers at the Bargain Bin that are not attached to this Community of Faith. They might not be church going people. It doesn't matter because I do know that they are kind and thoughtful people. I wouldn't have the audacity to ask any of them if they were believers. But I really don't need to. I just listen to them having their coffee time or interacting with a client and I know, they "live God."

A few weeks ago, I was in the pharmacy at the mall next to IGA. I was picking up something for Lenore who uses that store. I go to the one on Beach Avenue. One of the pharmacy assistants came out from the back. She used to work at the Beach Avenue store. She came up to me and said, "Hi Ian," I haven't seen you in a while. She had a huge smile on her face, and she gave me a big hug. I felt very blessed. I didn't have to ask her if she was a believer. She is a living disciple.

How many of those folks do you see and greet around your neighborhood or elsewhere here in Peachland? God lives in them too.

Now the other part of the question I was asked those years ago was if the gentleman I had met in hospital would go to heaven. What a great question for this time of Lent when we journey with Jesus to his ultimate death.

Let's substitute heaven with eternal life. John shares in his gospel **that everyone who believes may not perish but may have eternal life.**" How we view eternal life is personal and varied. Some have had clairvoyant experiences that affirm the presence of someone from the past. Others haven't been so fortunate, but somehow know intuitively the angels of our family members, friends and even pets are here. Somehow, the essence of what was, still is. That might be part of an eternal life, but I'm not certain.

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, Westminster John Know Press, Louisville Kentucky, 2008, p. 116

You may have heard it said before that eternal life refers not only to resurrection, or in a life beyond death, but to “knowing” God and Christ. That is, to have intimate communion with God and Christ in this life.<sup>2</sup> W Hulitt Gloer says something else you have likely heard before, “To believe is to have eternal life now.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus was, and Christ is, the beacon of light in the world. The light that we hold on to when depressing times surround us, and hope seems to have been lost. That light shines on and in individuals who refuse to give up or to give in. Those are the voices that sit with you when you need comfort. They are the hands that hold you up when you are weak. They are the shoulders you lean on when you are not steady enough to stand on your own. This is eternal life now. Eternal life now is in seeing and experiencing God in those kinds of moments.

Eternal life for the refugee is the opportunity for a new beginning; for the abused or battered, a safe Heaven of refuge. For the unhoused it might be a night in from the rain and cold, for the hungry a warm meal at the shelter. For the searching it might be the opportunity to sit quietly in this sanctuary praying for the spirit’s presence. Perhaps for the addict it might be a safe injection site.

For me eternal life is being a part of this ministry with all the encouragements I receive and the love I see between you all. It’s the feeling that you have when you know something you are doing, the way you are living, is helpful and meaningful to someone else. And it is the feeling you receive from someone who cares.

Reflecting back to that evening during my chaplaincy visit, I realize I could have said to the concerned wife, “your husband is a thoughtful, compassionate, and kind man. You obviously care a great deal about him. Rest assured there is a place in heaven for him because he is already there. He is in God’s company now and always has been. He always will be. He has always been a believer.

There are no barrier’s to being within God’s Holy Presence. Belief is recognizing that eternal arms of grace envelope us constantly. Sometimes we just forget to recognize them.

Moses held up an image reminding the people of whose they were, and the people lived. Jesus is lifted up too, lifted for us so we can be reminded to serve, love and forgive. That’s believing. That’s eternal life.

Amen And thanks for listening this morning.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 119, Paul C. Shupe

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 119, W. Hulitt Gloer