

“The Recovery of Belief”
John 10:22-30

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An atheist was walking through the forest when he heard a rustling in the woods behind him. Turning to look, the atheist found himself face to face with a charging seven-foot grizzly bear. “Oh, my God,” shouted the atheist momentarily forgetting his disbelief. Suddenly a bright light flooded the place. Time stopped. The bear froze and the forest became silent. Then a voice from heaven asked, “Am I to count you a believer?” The atheist thought for a moment and then replied, “I would feel like a hypocrite to become Christian after all these years. Maybe you could make this bear a Christian instead.” “Very well,” replied the voice. The light went out and the sounds of the forest returned. The bear folded his paws, bowed his head, and in a human voice said, “Lord, for this food I’m about to receive, I’m truly thankful.”

Belief. Don’t leave home without it. Belief. Hold on to it even when you doubt it. Somewhere in the forest, you’re going to need it.

It was wintertime. Everybody in the place was celebrating Hanukkah and Jesus was strolling through the temple court near Solomon’s porch when He found Himself in a heated debate about belief. “Tell us straight up,” said the crowd, “are You the Messiah?” Jesus replied, “I’ve already told you and I’ve already shown you but there are good reasons why you can’t believe.” Then, using the analogy of a shepherd and sheep, He gave us all a lesson about belief that we can take home with us. There are three things in this little dialogue between Jesus and those

who confronted Him that I want to bring to our attention.

Belief begins with recognition. “My sheep recognize My voice.” He was forever repeating it, it seems to me. “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Those who have eyes to see, let them see.” More miracles won’t help if you don’t have eyes to see them, says Jesus. More words won’t help if you don’t have ears to hear them. What a word for post-modern America. In medieval times, according to social philosopher, Jeremy Ruekin, the church ruled the world. Then the bubonic plagues hit Europe and people turned to the church for help. They heeded the advice of the clergy and made more offerings to God but the plagues hit their little communities anyway.

In response, people turned elsewhere for answers to the troubling questions of life, opening the door for the Renaissance and the Age of Reason and Science. In this modern enlightenment, we have lived and moved and had our being for all of these years until the end of the 20th century. But this philosophy of “I think, therefore I am,” has likewise left us wanting. You see, in spite of all of our education and in spite of all our knowledge; in spite of all our medical advances, one out of three people still get cancer and the last time I checked, 100% of all humans eventually die. I’ve also noticed that if all you have in life are cold, hard facts, it tends to leave us cold, hard people.

I’ve also observed that after all of our new frontiers and great societies and welfare reform, our children remain at risk and even go to school afraid for their safety. As a result of this, those who map the philosophical thought patterns of America say that you and I are living in a major shift of life understanding. We are entering the post-modern era. Instead of living in a culture of “I’ll believe it when I see it,” the doors are now open to entertaining the notion that “I can see it when I believe it.” What a

wonderful time for the church to be alive! If it's true that we're in this cultural shift, and I think we are, the doors are open for people to embrace faith in ways that have not been known in our lifetime. It makes a lot of difference whether you approach life with "If I can believe it, then I'll see it."

A shoe manufacturer sent two salesmen to a third world country to open a market to sell shoes. One sent a fax back real quickly and said, "This is a god-forsaken place. Nobody here wears shoes. I'm coming home." The other salesman wrote to his employer and said, "This is a wonderful opportunity. I'm grateful you gave me this territory. Nobody here wears shoes. Would you send me 5,000 pair so I can begin selling tomorrow?" How you see it makes all the difference in the long run.

Harold Kushner, the Jewish Rabbi that has helped people across all religions, defines religion as a way of seeing. Religion doesn't change the facts about the world we live in, but it can change the way we interpret those facts. You become a certain kind of person when you choose to believe there is a pattern and a purpose to the world. Religion is a framework, a set of glasses, and a set of ears, through which I see and interpret the events of life.

C. S. Lewis put it this way, "I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else." My religious convictions shape the way that I see the world. Belief begins with a set of eyes and ears by which and through which I see and hear the world.

Belief, in the second place, is grounded in a relationship. Did you notice this little analogy Jesus gives? "My sheep listen to My voice. I know them and they know Me." There's a relationship here and because

of this relationship, belief is stimulated. If belief were a matter of creeds and catechisms, knowledge and understanding then we would do well to open more academies and offer more degrees and join forces with those who want to put religion back in the public schools. George Barna says believers are largely indistinguishable from non-believers in how they think and live according to his surveys of American values. It's caused the church to lose its place at the table of cultural influence. You see, **belief is more than a set of facts.** It's more than simply knowing the Bible, as important as that is. It's more than simply memorizing creeds. **Belief, at its heart, has to do with a relationship to Jesus Christ.** It's out of this relational side of belief that our lives take on meaning.

One of the most common pictures on the wall of the Roman catacombs, I'm told, was not the cross, or even the fish which was the symbol of early Christianity. It was a picture of a shepherd with sheep. This picture of community was the picture of the early Church.

Sometimes children get it quicker than adults. They do with most things, do they not? I'm grateful for the children of this church. One of them gave me a note on the back of an offering envelope a couple of weeks ago that went something like this, "Dear Dr. Olds, You really tell funny jokes and when you're done pastoring you ought to consider becoming a comedian." But then she said this, "If we meet and you forget me, you've lost nothing but if you meet Jesus Christ and you forget Him, you've lost everything." That's deep. Do you get it? You see, belief is born out of this kind of relationship. At heart, it's relational. "I know the sheep, they follow Me." It's this connection that makes belief important. In fact, it's more important than all the facts and figures that you can put around it.

In 1966, Randy Johnson, the nephew of President Johnson, was quarterback for Oklahoma State University. He was a mediocre quarterback for a mediocre team. However, Randy sensed he could become a legend if, some way, Oklahoma State could beat the University of Oklahoma in the final game of the season. He got his opportunity. In the last game of the season, with the rain pouring down and the time running out, Oklahoma State was behind 6 points and 80 yards from the goal line. The coach, in an act of surrender, sent in all the seniors and asked Randy, "Why don't you call the last play of the game?" Randy got his team in a huddle and called play number 13. Now play number 13 had never been used before because it had never worked at practice. It was a trick play. Nevertheless, on that day, it worked, and believe it or not, Oklahoma State scored a touchdown and wound up winning the ballgame by 1 point.

In the locker room, the coach asked Randy, "Why on earth did you call play 13?" "Well," said Randy, "we were in this huddle and I saw Harry over there with tears in his eyes, I looked at him and he had this big 8 on his chest. Then I looked over at Ralph with tears running down his face and he had this big 7 on his jersey. So I put the two together and called play number 13." The coach said to Randy, "Don't you understand that 8 and 7 are 15?" To which Randy replied, "Well, you're right coach, but if I was as smart as you are, we would have lost the game."

If Christianity were a matter of getting the facts right, some of us would be home free. Even more important is whether or not you've made the connection and developed the relationship that endures through the struggles of time. Belief is a matter of recognition. "My sheep know My voice." Belief is a matter of relationship. "My sheep know Me and they follow."

Belief is a matter of assurance. Verse 28 says, “I will give them eternal life, they will never perish and no one can snatch them out of My hands.” Assurance is the advantage of grace.

*‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
and grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.*

It was the assurance of salvation that set in motion the Wesleyan revival that produced the people of denomination persuasion. John Wesley, in writing about his Aldersgate experience says, “About a quarter to nine, I felt my heart strangely warmed and I felt I did trust in Christ and Christ alone for my salvation.” And then he says this, “an assurance was given me that Christ had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of death.” If we in our own strength reside, our salvation will always be in question. Salvation, however, is not in our hands; it’s in God’s hands. “No one will snatch them out of My hands,” says Jesus. The truth is, that God’s grasp on us is much stronger than our grasp on God. That makes all the difference.

A little girl went to a ballgame with her dad. She was trying to keep up with her dad, running with him, taking three or four steps to his one. She became weary with the whole process. The little girl looked up at her dad and said, “Daddy, I can’t hold on to you any longer. You’re going to have to hold on to me.” In a wild and weary world where it seems like the harder you try, the more behind you become, we will do well to remember that God holds us in the palm of His hand. That is grace.

So we gather at the table for this relational experience of Holy Communion. May we have ears to hear and eyes to

see this mystery unfolded before us. For this Holy Meal we're about to receive, let us be truly thankful, for it really is a means of grace. Amen.