

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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August 4, 2024

When I was in seminary I took a course that was *just* “Preaching the Gospel of John” because while John *is* my favorite gospel writer, by a wide margin, he’s also the one that confuses me the most and the thought of needing to preach him intimidated me. Because like...John will say all of these words and...it’s not even like they’re words I don’t know! The sentences themselves will make perfect sense to me, but I still often will feel like *something* is happening in the passage that I am just not getting. Like there’s some additional meaning just gently flapping over my head that I can’t quite reach. And instead of that just-out-of-reachness being off putting, for me at least, it has always just made me more enamored with John’s gospel. Speaking in riddles again, eh John? That’s ok the crowds Jesus is speaking to seem perpetually confused by what he is saying as well so I have company, I guess. And I get like 80% of what you’re saying I think, and I like this 80 and hope to one day figure out the other 20. And that was all very well and good when I was just reading it to myself but then I have to preach it and oh shoot.

So, I quickly learned that the major “problem” with following what John is talking about—the root cause of that just-out-of-reachness is that John loved word play and puns and would use them *constantly* but...while English is obviously a very flexible language and full of its own puns and stuff, it’s actually really really really hard to translate a pun into another language. The word play rarely lines up the same way in both languages so you can’t! So translators have this reoccurring issue throughout John where they can

either give you the literal or the figurative phrasing but can't do both, or at least can't do them both well. So yeah, there is stuff hovering just out of reach, it's the other half of all of these puns and such John was deploying.

And on top of that, John intended for his entire gospel to be heard from end to end in a single sitting. So, the further you get into the fourth gospel, the more throwbacks and allusions he makes to themes and events from earlier in the story. And if you haven't read those previous chapters recently, those throwback references are also going to pass right over you. So far in the story Jesus has only performed two "signs" two miracles—he turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana, and then he, just the night before multiplied loaves and fishes for the feeding of the five thousand. Both of these miracles were times when the people around him were distressed, and Jesus demonstrated God's abundant love not in abstract words but in immediate and tangible ways that addressed their needs.

So it would be clear to us all, if we'd read every part of the story up to this point how kind of...out of place and extreme the crowds request in this story is. Because...a *lot* of events happen between Jesus' first Sign, and his second one, and in the time in between many people have come to trust he is the Messiah without *any* signs, just by conversations they have with him and things he is teaching. And the second one happened *less than 24 hours before this*, and these folks who are talking to him *witnesses that sign*, and yet here they come asking for another.

And before they can even speak on the matter Jesus reveals that he knows exactly why they are here, and he says it is not, in fact, that they saw this sign and in it recognized the abundant love of God and wanted to experience that again. No Jesus says it is because they ate their fill of bread and want that again. And let's be clear, Jesus is not saying that feeding the hungry is bad, obviously doing so is something he supports because he *just* did it. No he's scolding them because they saw this miraculous thing and didn't view it beyond just this surface level point of just having their needs met. They are amongst the few that have seen an entire Sign from Jesus and yet it caused no spiritual movement in them. And Jesus says hey friends, don't make a habit of this, it's not that the surface level is bad, but you are still missing the point. I was trying to feed you spiritually too and it seems like you kind of missed that part.

And in the crowd's defense, they do seem to be receptive to that gentle scolding. Ok Jesus then what do we need to do then to be doing the works of God? To be having this kind of spiritual growth and movement you hoped for from us. And then Jesus answers, and his answer contains one of my biggest frustrations with English translations of John. Because I personally think the *entire meaning* of this sentence changes depending on how you interpret one tiny word. And this is Jesus' answer telling us what we must do to perform the works of God so like...probably kind of important that we get the words right, yeah?

See here's the problem, in Greek the word "faith" can be both a noun and a verb. Now remember back to grade school a noun is a person place or thing, and a verb is the action word of a sentence, it's what the person place or thing is doing. Anyhow in Greek "faith" can be both a noun *and* a verb but in English it's *only* a noun. And we can easily test that that's true in case that's a head scratcher. "She is running." That's a whole sentence right there real simple, she is our noun that's the person this sentence is about, what is she doing? Running there's our verb. Now let's try the same sentence again "She is faithing." That's not really a sentence, is it? In English we do not conceptualize faith as an action, as a thing you do, we conceptualize it as a thing or idea, something you *have*. And that makes it tricky to translate several passages throughout John, because he talks about this "doing" sort of faith quite a lot. And one of those times is here in Jesus' answer, because more literally Jesus' response would be "This is the work of God, that you are faithing in him whom he has sent."

And that led translators to this kind of weird existential crisis where they had to ask themselves ok, what does it mean to "do faith?" How would I go about articulating this concept of "faithing" to an English speaker? I want to make sure they understand this is an *action* they are to do and *not* a commodity they should try to obtain. And yes, traditionally they settled on "believe" which...isn't a wrong translation necessarily. Like we can all see how belief can be a way of "doing" faith yeah?

But belief carries connotation of its own in English that...aren't quite right and aren't there at all in the Greek. Because belief means things hang on you. Belief can be undermined by questions or doubt. Even if you don't want to feel that way and desperately want your doubts to go away...if they're there they are there and there's not really a whole lot you can do about that is there? Belief isn't even something you can always have active control over. "Belief" makes it sound like this whole assignment of doing the works of God falls squarely on you and if you hesitate, if you question or doubt, you have failed in your mission and aren't doing what Jesus requires of you. All of this is at odds with this basic premise of our faith, the idea that it's not up to what you do or don't do, it's up to God and God's abundant love and grace fully given to us all.

And some other more modern day translators thought that over and went hey the Greek verb for faith contains none of those connotations, there's none of that tension between "faith" and "doubt" in Greek, there's certainly no implication that like something as minor as a compulsive thought could undo or cancel "faith the action." Belief is not inherently a bad translation but...it's going to give people the wrong idea. We can do better. So let's try again, what does it mean, to "do" faith? And the answer that they gave was one of the most life-giving bits of theology I have ever encountered.

They said to "do faith" is to trust. And you can say ok trust and believe sound very similar. And they are but...I think back to this time I was in the high school play and my character needed to scream and throw herself

backwards and the other characters nearby catch her, and all of them were my friends. The first day we did that scene we had to repeat my collapse for 30 minutes before we'd fully coordinated exactly which people were catching me and they got the technique down. During this time my friends caught me maybe 10% of the time overall. And we'd go again, and I would scream and throw myself back *trusting* that they would catch me. Did I *believe* they would catch me? Oh, absolutely not I'd be grimacing and preparing to hit the floor each time. But even though I *believed* they would fail at their task, I still *trusted* that they wouldn't and went forward (or I guess in this case backwards) regardless.

And it's like that in our faith lives too, we can partially or even fully *believe* that God has abandoned us, or doesn't care, or isn't real, or whatever else our doubts may say, we can *believe* that *and yet* still *trust* that that isn't the case and continue following after Jesus, even as our intrusive thoughts are full of questions and doubt. These are not mutually exclusive ideas. Jesus says we are to *do faith*. What could be more faithful than continuing on your path even with that little voice whispering anxieties at you?

This then is the work of God, that you *trust* in him whom he has sent. And I don't know about the rest of you, but *that* task is a *whole lot* easier for me to do than believing. Yes, Jesus I trust you, fully and completely. I don't always understand what's going on, and I'm often worried about what's ahead or think things are about to blow up in my face, but I trust you. And I rejoice that today Jesus says that is all he asks of me. Just a trust fall.

He is the bread of life, whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever *trusts* in him will never be thirsty. All he asks is you show up and follow him, he will figure out the rest. A trust fall right into the loving embrace of the maker of the cosmos, where you will be caught and cradled every time, even if you're muttering mutinously in the process. That's not so very hard of a task.

And yes, in case you were wondering, *every* time the word "belief" shows up in John, it's this "doing faith" word. And every time you see it you can quietly swap the word "trust" in its place. Try it sometime, see how different some of those passages feel.

So I leave us today with John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever trusts in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.

And for this good news we rejoice. Amen.