

Union Bridge Church of the Brethren

Sermon for Sunday, August 21, 2005

Matthew 16:13-20

How We Believe

This has been the summer of baseball for me – as of Monday, I’ve attended ten professional games: two Frederick Keys game, a Peoria Chiefs game in Illinois, a Cedar Rapids Kernels game in Iowa, a Reading Phillies game and a Philadelphia Phillies game in Pennsylvania, a Washington Nationals game and 3 Orioles games. Sadly, my beloved Cubs are fading fast, but all in all, I must say that I’ve enjoyed myself this season. I might even squeeze in another game or two before it’s over – an even dozen sounds good to me.

In case you haven’t been there lately, I should tell you that a trip to the old ballpark isn’t just about baseball anymore. There are picnic pavilions, swimming pools and hot tubs, mascots and merry-go-rounds. There is also lots of between-innings entertainment. One of my favorite moments during this baseball summer was watching what the folks in Reading call “The Human Hamster Ball Race.” They put two people in huge clear plastic balls that roll just like the plastic balls that hamsters run about in, and then those two people race, regularly bumping into each other and knocking each other off balance. It looked like a blast, and was great fun to watch.

On the other hand, I regret to say that one of my least favorite between-innings entertainments has become ubiquitous – the infamous “Kiss Cam.” This involves cameras around the stadium zooming in on unsuspecting men and women sitting side by side in the stands. The picture is then projected up onto the jumbotron screen for everyone to see, under the words “Kiss Cam.” If the couple sees themselves up on the screen, they are supposed to kiss. If they do, people applaud. If they kiss passionately, people cheer. If they don’t kiss at all, people boo.

Of course, the people with the cameras only point the cameras at pairs they assume are couples – husband and wife or boyfriend/girlfriend. But frequently it is painfully obvious that the people with the cameras have assumed wrong – they have paired up people who are strangers or siblings or otherwise have no reason to want to kiss each other, especially with 40,000 people watching.

So now, if you go to a ball game you have this to worry about. What if a woman you don’t know sits down beside you and the two of you end up on the Kiss Cam? And what if, even though you don’t know her from Eve, she decides to try to kiss you anyway, because she doesn’t want to be booed? And what if when she tries to kiss you, your wife is sitting right there on your other side? Well, maybe I’ve given this way too much thought, but in the end it comes down to this – I just don’t like being put on the spot.

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Few of us do. But now and then in life, it happens and we have to deal with it. Imagine that you work in an office and you are in the middle of a meeting. It's crunch time. There are decisions to be made. Your colleagues are weighing in with their opinions. Suddenly, your boss turns to you and says, "Ms. Jones, what do you think?"

"Hmm . . .well . . .," you begin, buying time. "Statistics indicate that Plan B would be profitable, though of course Plan A does offer some attractive benefits . . . and then again, many believe that Plan C"

Your boss interrupts you: "Actually, Ms. Jones, I'd like to know what you think."

Inevitably, we find ourselves in those critical moments when it's time to step up to the plate and declare where we stand. The disciples of Jesus found themselves in just such a moment one day when, out of the blue, Jesus cut to the chase and asked them, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Of course, Peter was the first to step up to the plate and declare, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." It was a good answer, even if Peter didn't really grasp all the implications of it. Nonetheless, it is what Jesus said in reply to Simon Peter that will be our focus this morning. Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

What a slick move! In one simple response, Jesus both congratulates Peter and deprives him of any grounds for boasting. "Blessed are you" indicates that Peter has it right. But "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you" makes clear that Peter's answer is not proof of superior intelligence. Peter didn't figure this out. It occurred to him.

In his wonderful little book, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner describes the difference. He writes, "There are two different ways of describing how you came to know something. One way is to say you figured it out. The other way is to say it occurred to you. Reason is involved in both. To say you figured out that So-and-So was your best friend means that you reasoned your way to such a conclusion. To say it occurred to you that So-and-So was your best friend suggests that although the conclusion was not reached by reason, it was not incompatible with reason."

Forgive me if that is a little hard to follow. The point I want you to carry away is this: as useful as reason may be, it can only go so far, and sometimes it cannot take us where we need to go. Specifically, reason is not incompatible with faith but we never truly reason our way to faith.

When I was younger, I read a book by Josh McDowell called, *Evidence That*

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Demands A Verdict. What McDowell sets out to do is to marshal all the evidence for Jesus' resurrection in the hope that those who are confronted with the evidence will be compelled to place their faith in Jesus. It took me years before I realized what was wrong with McDowell's approach. It wasn't the evidence he presented – it was the basic idea that faith in Jesus can be compelled by facts about Jesus. Faith is more than believing all the “right” things about Jesus – much more. Faith is believing *in* Jesus, becoming his disciple and following Jesus' way of life.

Jim Wallis says that in the New Testament era, faith wasn't something you believed; it was something you practiced. He may not be quite right, but he's close. Faith in the New Testament was trust – trust in a person, the person named Jesus. It was trust that Jesus revealed more clearly than ever before who God is and what God wants. And that kind of trust automatically changes how we see the world and how we live in it. It is reflected in our behavior. It must be practiced.

I don't mind talking to people who have sincere doubts and questions about God and how the idea of God or some of the things the church says about Jesus make sense. But, in all fairness, I warn inquirers that all the theology, all the philosophy and all the answers I have to offer will only take them so far.

It will only take us to the threshold of faith. There we must decide whether or not to enter in – and there will always be questions and doubts left over. That is how it is with all the most important decisions of our lives. I'm sure you've heard the old sayings – “If you wait until you're sure you are ready to have kids (or get married), you never will.” So it is with faith. Faith disappears when you have all the facts, but in this life we never have all the facts. Faith is the leap we make based on the facts we have.

When Yuri Gagarin, the first Soviet cosmonaut, returned from space, he is said to have remarked that he didn't see God in heaven. Soon afterward, a Moscow-based priest of the Orthodox Church responded, “If you have not seen him on earth, you will never see him in heaven.” It was a wonderful response. Seeing God is not like seeing a tree or a rock or another human being. We who see God do not look only with our eyes. We look with our hearts. We do not just tally up the evidence; we choose to believe. We do not believe because we see; we see because we believe.

Faith, ultimately, is God's gift. We do not figure it out. It occurs to us. God gives it to us. All we can do is receive it gladly and live thereafter gratefully.

So open your heart as well as your eyes – for I believe that God wants to give each of us the gift of faith.

Amen.