

This Gospel In John...

Kirk Alan Kubicek

This Gospel in John is what is traditionally read every year on the first Sunday after Easter. For reasons that become less and less clear to me, we somewhat smugly refer to this as “Doubting Thomas Sunday.” Which is too bad.

It is too bad because such a designation reinforces a number of misunderstandings and wrong assumptions about the heart of the Christian faith — beginning with a decidedly negative connotation to the word “doubt.” We assume doubt to be bad or even the opposite of faith. We tend to think of Thomas as something less than a faithful disciple of Jesus.

Many, however, such as the great twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich, view doubt not as the opposite of faith but as an element of faith itself. Or as Frederich Beuchner put it in his book *Wishful Thinking*, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

Faith, as described in Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews, 11:1, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” An example given in that epistle is Abraham taking off on a journey with no maps. Faith is not knowing where you are going, but going anyway.

I have faith that my friend is my friend. I cannot prove that friendship. And when I experience that friendship I have no need to prove it. And were I to try and prove it through some sort of testing, the friendship would go bad and become no friendship at all. So it is with God in Christ.

I have faith that a certain piece of music is beautiful, but I cannot begin to prove its beauty. I experience it as beautiful, but cannot necessarily demonstrate its beauty. So it is with God in Christ.

So we have the disciples, minus Thomas the Twin, who have an experience of the Risen Lord. We should note, however, that they do not say they believe Jesus has risen. They do not say they have faith in the risen Lord. They only say, “We have seen the Lord.”

They have experienced Jesus again after the crucifixion.

Thomas wants to have a similar experience. We could say that whatever doubt Thomas may have harbored, moved him to want to share in their experience. And in all honesty, at the end of the day, we are here because we want to share in their experience as well.

What is interesting, is what Thomas says when he does share the experience: “My Lord and my God!”

This stands as an early, if not the earliest creedal statement, alongside Martha’s, “I believe that you are the Anointed One who is coming into the world.”

I suggest creedal because the very first word of both the Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds is the word credo. This Latin word is commonly translated as “I believe.” And because we are modern people, we tend to understand belief in its post-enlightenment, post-scientific sense as assent to statements that are verifiable and true. This has the effect of making Christian faith a matter of the head, implying that the important thing is to believe the right set of claims.

Credo, however, in its Latin roots, means literally, “I give my heart to.” Which has the sense of saying, “I commit my loyalty to”, “I commit my allegiance to,” “this is how I see the world in my heart.”

In the world of the Bible, and in the world of Jesus and Thomas, the heart represents a deeper place of the self, a deeper dimension of belief

than thinking, willing, and feeling; deeper than our intellect, emotions and volition. The heart is deeper than the head and any ideas we might have. In fact, prior to the seventeenth century, the word “believe” did not mean believing a set of statements or propositions.

The object of believing expressed in the creeds was not statements, but a person. That person is God, Son, and Holy Spirit. So when Thomas and John the evangelist speak of belief, it is credo; it is giving one’s heart to Jesus as God.

That is, to believe means to love. What we believe is what we “belove.” Faith is about “beloving” God in Christ. It is about being in relationship with God.

So when Jesus says the great commandment is to Love God and Love your neighbor, he is talking about relationships. He concludes, “Upon these two relationships hang all the law and the prophets”. The law and the prophets are the first two parts of the Hebrew Bible, the whole Bible of Jesus. So he says all of scripture depends on these two relationships: loving God and loving your neighbor. Or we are to love God and that which God loves — which is all creation and everything and everyone therein.

When Thomas says, “My Lord and my God,” I believe it is his way of saying, “I give my heart to God and all that God loves.” This is the heart of the Christian faith, which is itself a way of the heart. This is why we might do well to call this Credo Sunday instead of Doubting Thomas Sunday: Credo, a day to give our hearts to God and all that God loves.

Amen.