

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year B) – March 15, 2015
On Nicodemus and Trust

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Reflections on Eph 2:4-10, John 3:14-21

This week's two readings from the New Testament ask us to consider *what* we believe—indeed, *if* we believe. They invite us to look into our “state of soul,” and ask us to consider whether we have ever experienced “that thing called **faith**” – or its near-synonym, **belief**.

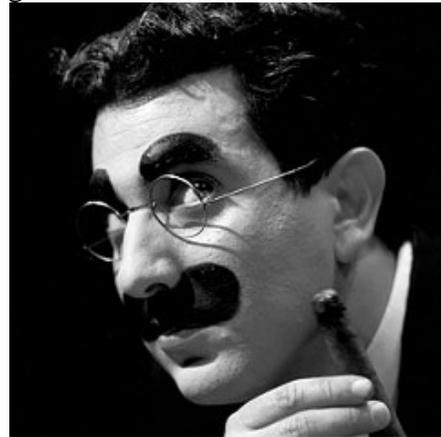
The problem is this: Too often in our scriptures, it sounds like *what we believe* is being held up as a make-it-or-break-it requirement for being saved! It reminds me of that evangelical “litmus test”: “Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and savior?” Did you get the words right? Saying the right words is really important!

Sorry, but I have a problem with the requirement of professing explicit “faith” in order to enjoy *salvation*—whatever *salvation* may mean. (It seems to have something to do with a heavenly reward after we're dead and gone.) When it comes to salvation, I suspect I'm not the only “wondering Thomas” among us.

I started questioning “belief” doctrines as a litmus test when I realized that my children—even though baptized as infants and raised as Church-going Catholics by their thoroughly modern, liberal and loving parents—simply dropped out of organized religion as soon as they left home for college. They became good-hearted agnostics. They had no time for creeds and dogmas. And I think that's OK. Who knows . . . the urge of young adults to defect from organized religion may be the work of the Holy Spirit.

To put it another way, I don't have much confidence in “magic word” games. Remember Groucho Marx's TV quiz show called “You Bet Your Life?” (It ran from

1950 to 1960.) He always had a bird descend from above his head at the beginning of the show with a word in its beak—the “magic word,” which he shared with the audience. Then when the contestants came on stage, he would tell them, “Say the magic word and divide a hundred dollars!” Of course, sometimes they stumbled upon it, if it were a common noun like “situation” or “appetite.” When that happened, a buzzer would sound and the bird would descend with a \$100 bill in its beak! Someone said the magic word... and won!



Now imagine some fellow who looks like Groucho Marx at the pearly gates today, cigar in hand, quizzing the souls that arrive seeking admission. Do you think he's going to announce, “Say the magic words of the Nicene Creed and enter heaven?” . . . I don't think so.

Last week Mary did some counting and found that only three of the ten commandments mention God. (!) Well, this week I did some counting, and discovered that in the King James Bible, the word “faith” only occurs twice in the entire Old Testament, but

229 times in the N.T. Similarly, the verb “believe” is found 17 times in the Old Testament, 114 times in the new.

Even allowing for a large margin of error-in-translation, what does this tell us about what really mattered to the forbears of our Jewish brothers and sisters?

Well if nothing else, it suggests that *what people might have claimed to believe*, in Old Testament times, was not a “say-the-magic-word” proposition! It was much *less* important to the compilers of the Hebrew Bible (and presumably to God) than *how* people actually behaved. This word count reminds us that in biblical Judaism, *orthopraxis* (righteous living) trumped *orthodoxy* (spouting the right beliefs) hands down. And it still does today.

Paul, in his second letter to the Ephesians, assures us that God is “rich in mercy” and praises the bounty of God’s grace. But then he injects that problematic *F* word (faith) into his salvation equation, writing: “It is by grace that you have been saved, through *faith*.” Is not God’s grace alone sufficient? (God’s “amazing grace”?) I leave you to ponder that question.

John’s Gospel, especially Chapter 3 (part of which we heard today), introduces us to a *righteous* man—Nicodemus. Even though he was a member of the Jewish ruling council, he recognized how much was genuine in Jesus and he just couldn’t ignore the young rabbi from Nazareth.

He visited Jesus at night, and was supposedly the happy recipient of the beautiful teachings that were read in today’s gospel, including John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

But then John’s gospel has a change in tone. These are recorded as Jesus’ very next words: “Whoever *believes* in the Only Begotten avoids judgment, but whoever *does*

not believe stands condemned already, for *not believing* in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

Ouch! I’m not at all sure Jesus really said those very words. Honestly, when Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, wouldn’t it have been like one Rabbi speaking to another? I would wager ten-to-one odds that Jesus *did not say anything threatening* to Nicodemus that night.

What Jesus might have said, however, could have been closer in meaning to our gut-feeling word “to trust” than to our creed-laden word, “to believe.”

Let’s try to recast for a moment the beautiful words of Jesus’s message to Nicodemus as if they were really coming from one Jewish teacher to another, in terms that would have made real sense to the recipient.

Jesus might have told Nicodemus, in the present tense, that “Abba-God so loves this world that he sent me, his anointed one, with a message of *great* good news! *Trust* me — you will not perish; *trust* me — you will have everlasting life. For God has not sent me here to condemn the world, but rather to save it.”

Jesus might have added, “Whoever hears my message and has *confidence* in my message need not fear divine judgment.”

But I doubt that he would have told a fellow Jew that “Those who do not believe in me stand condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” No, my friends. Those last lines are fightin’ words by and for John’s marginalized community, dealing with its own stressful loyalty issues decades later.

I wonder . . . do you think Nicodemus had confidence in what Jesus told him, face to face? I think so! Furthermore, we know that Nicodemus continued to be a good practicing Jew—*doing* what needed to be done to give Jesus a proper burial.

In Jn 19:39 we read that Nicodemus accompanied Joseph of Arimathea to Pilate to ask for Jesus’ body, and the request was granted. Nicodemus brought along “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five

pounds,” with which to coat Jesus’ body to counteract the anticipated stench of decay. Nicodemus had no idea that there would be a bodily resurrection.

And so, in honor of the many sincere Nicodemuses of the world, who try to do the right thing, even if they are oblivious to the “pillars of Catholic doctrine,” I’m beginning to draft a letter that I might send to *my* agnostic children and *their* agnostic children some time in the future. It goes something like this:

Dear kids,

- It’s OK to question everything, honestly, even Jesus’ divine nature. . . but we hope you can still be joyful at the Easter proclamation of the resurrection, the way your parents still are. There’s something

awfully appealing about the prospect of eternal life.

- It’s OK not to know “what God has in store for those who love him...” We expect to be surprised, too. But we hope and anticipate that our whole family shall meet again in the afterlife, where we probably will be able to see all creation more clearly and love it and its Creator more dearly.
- Finally, it’s OK to believe nothing in particular, as long as you continue being the good people you are, especially if you treat others the way you would want to be treated—that is, if you live the golden rule. What we *do* counts far more than what we *say*. It really does!

Amen.