

Matthew 28:16-20, Genesis 1:1-2:4, 2nd Corinthians 13:11-13
Holy Trinity, May 22, 2005
Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Berkeley, CA
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One of the singular pleasures of living in Berkeley is the bumper-stickers. Friends who live in more conservative parts of the country, virtually any part of the country, point with delight as they see car after car pass: “Every mother is a working mother” “Don’t believe everything you think.” “My other car is a bicycle.” “Compost – a rind is a terrible thing to waste.” I’m sure you all have your favorites.

And of course, just like Berkeley has its own bumper stickers, Berkeley has its own version of the ubiquitous Jesus fish. You know what I’m talking about, those little metal fish on the back of cars that are a modern take on the ancient symbol of the faith. In the ancient world, back when Christianity was a subversive and deviant faith, Christians would identify themselves to one another with the sign of the fish. The word for fish in Greek is IKTUS. Christians used the sign of the fish as a short hand for a phrase in which each word represented one letter of IKTUS “Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior.”

Nowadays the little Jesus fish on the back bumper isn’t a secret nod to those in the know; it’s a more overt symbol of the car occupant’s faith. The Jesus fish is a sign that one believes. And in the rest of the country they are pretty common, gracing SUV and Hybrid alike. But in Berkeley, where symbols of one’s beliefs on one’s car are common, the Jesus fish is something of an endangered species. More often than not, when one sees a fish on a back bumper it isn’t a Jesus fish, it’s a Darwin fish.

A Unitarian in Colorado Springs originally developed the Darwin fish as a protest to the Christian Right. He took a Jesus fish and gave it legs and through the middle of the fish wrote the word “Evolve.” The Darwin fish’s primary meaning is a belief in the process of evolution, as opposed to conservative Christian’s unyielding support of Creationism. But in the eyes of many Darwin fish owners, and in the eyes of many conservative Christians, the symbol means something else. As the Jesus fish stands for belief the Darwin fish means doubt. It means questioning the Christian faith.

For many the two fish seem diametrically opposed. For many it seems like you have to choose – will you be a believer or will you be a questioner. And its not just a matter of how you will decorate your car. Evolution, abortion, gay and lesbian marriages, the war in Iraq to many he issues are black and white with no room for grey. Your either with us or against us, so make up your mind.

Many progressive Christians live in a state of quandary. We find ourselves doing a quick step – assuring our non-Christian friends that we aren’t uneducated or prejudiced, but that we also truly believe in Christ and in the truth of Scripture. About a year after we had met some friends from my husband’s grad-school days looked him up on Google. And sure enough they found Jayesh Shah, but not through his academic or professional work. They found an Augustana Lutheran Church newsletter item about him baptism. When they called they confessed that it took them

about a month to work up the courage to call. Having known Jay as a non-practicing Unitarian, they wondered what had happened. Jay's friends worried that Jay had become some kind of a fire breathing Christian Coalition member; they worried that he would no longer have anything in common with them. Jay laughed and reassured him that he was a member of a more accepting Lutheran branch than all that, but he realized that he walked a fine line. Jay had changed, he did have new values and new beliefs, albeit not quite the ones his friends feared. I think many of us have been in that place wondering how we can be in the world but not of the world. How we can believe and question at the same time?

We know we have to be believers. Today is Trinity Sunday, the day on which we proclaim the central mystery of our faith – that God is three and that God is one. It is a mystery discerned not by a cabal of theologians, but rather by the earliest Christian people. They recognized that their God was the same one God of the Jewish people, yet they saw in God different forms, distinct, yet still God. The thoughts of these earliest Christian people were codified into Creed recognizing that there is something essential to Christian belief in them. Yet what explaining what exactly that is isn't easy.

The Trinity isn't an easy topic. Martin Luther said, "To try to deny the Trinity is risk your salvation, to try to understand the Trinity is to risk your sanity." On last night's Prairie Home Companion Garrison Keeler urged Pr. Inkfest not to try to explain the Trinity, especially not the Holy Spirit, who, in his words, is better left to the Pentecostals down the street. We know in our hearts a creative aspect of God, a Savior that came once for all, and a Spirit that still abides with us today. But how these things come into being, how these things work together isn't clear. People might ask us what we believe and why, and if Luther himself couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer, then how can we hope to do so ourselves? We wonder if we're not believers after all.

We wonder if we're not believers after all when we're presented with texts like today's. Today our first lesson was from the very beginning of Genesis recounting the story of God creating the world. It's a story at the heart of a major struggle taking place in the Kansas school system right now. A group of Christians are certain that evolution could not be the process by which modern life came to be. They believe in the description of creation given by Genesis down to the letter. Life came into being in seven days, set into motion by an "Intelligent Designer," not, as they would name it, by an "atheistic process." They say that they cannot espouse or teach evolution because they are Christians, and as true believers, they cannot doubt the literal word of God.

Such a description of Christianity, such an interpretation of belief, puts most of us into the questioner camp again. We believe that God is our creator, and yet we believe in natural process too. In this congregation we probably have a higher percentage of people with advanced degrees in science than perhaps any other in the synod. We understand something of scientific process and theory. We know what carbon dating means. We know about the revelations of the Galapagos islands. So we just can't read the Word in Genesis literally. But if we question the Word in this instance, are we truly faithful Christians? We wonder if we're not believers after all.

In a world divided into questioners and believers, its hard to say who would end up where. Its hard for me to imagine myself falling in any one group consistently. But the Good News is, my brothers and sisters, that I don't think Jesus demands that we be believers with no questioning in us. I think that there's room in Christianity for questions, and, what's more, I think we are called to be, as it says on the sign outside, "Questioning believers."

Being questioners is central to being believers, even if it doesn't at first seem obvious. From all the scriptural evidence it is clear that what hindered believing was refusing to question. Scribes, and Pharisees, high priests and teachers of the law, are many things, but they are not questioners. Sure of themselves and their uprightness, they do not doubt that they know Scripture. They have no question that they understand the will of God. And for that they are portrayed as the enemies of Jesus, just as much as the unbelieving Romans. It is important to question to be a person of faith.

In the Gospel lesson for today Jesus appears to his disciples one last time on the mountain top. And in the translation provided for us in our bulletin today it says, "they worshiped him; but some doubted." My Greek leads me to a different translation. Some very small and very common modifiers are used in this section, men, and de. These words can mean a number of different things, including the "but" that the NRSV translators use. But I prefer another translation, equally valid. I think that this 17th verse of Matthew 28 should be translated, "Some of them worshiped him, AND some of them doubted." I think that those disciples gathered on the mountain that last time Jesus appeared were believers, but I also think that they were questioners.

From all the scriptural evidence its clear that the disciples aren't always believers. They are always misinterpreting, always running away at important moments, always doubting. Yet these men are set to become the heroes of the faith, the people who spread the word so that it comes down to you and me. I think that they fill this role because they were simultaneously believers and questioners. None fell fully into one camp or another, just as surely as you and I cannot be so branded.

Questioning believers have always been God's people. Questioning believers have written our holy texts including Genesis. After all, in the first three chapters of the book are two complete and completely different accounts of how the world began. One we read today, the beautiful ordered story of six days of God's creation the last of which includes the creation of man and woman in God's image. The other is messier, a God who walks on the earth gathers up mud to form the first Man, Adam, only later creating the first woman, Eve. These are stories that beg questions by their very juxtaposition. They ask us to dig deeper, to wonder with each other, to seek a meaning from these stories beyond a literal telling of creation.

Questioning believers were the first apostles. And questioning believers carried the tradition forward, explaining our understandings of God using the theology of the Trinity and the form of a Creed. You can see their questions in the open frameworks they used. When we proclaim the creed, it bears noting how much we don't say we believe. We don't talk about how one should vote or what one should believe about creation, or abortion, or LGBT issues. We don't even talk

about exactly what makes the crucifixion salvific. These important issues are left open to wonder and challenge. Belief is not hindered by such questions.

We are made disciples not to choose sides in a belief and questioning debate. But we are also not called to seek some sort of middle ground in some nebulous place between the two. In the words of Dr. King, we are not to seek a common ground but a higher one.

We are to seek that higher ground of 2nd Corinthians where we can live in peace with one another. We are to baptize the people into belief, but we are also to teach to their questions. It is a challenging task, but one we are equipped to do. Jesus is with us, even to the end of the age. Our faith is large enough to hold us questioning believers.

The fact of the matter is that our faith is bigger than a Jesus fish or a Darwin fish. It doesn't fit neatly on a bumper sticker. It means that we believe in an intelligent designer who created a wonderful world through evolution. It means we believe in a Trinity even if we can't explain how it works. It means we see not a black and white world, and not a grey one either. With God wondering with us the world of a questioning believer is a world of higher ground. It is not coded only in black and white, but it shines in all the colors of the rainbow.

Thanks be to God. Amen.