

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 16, 2009

Today's Reading:

John 5: 35-47

I can do nothing on my own; I listen then I decide. You can trust my decision because I am not out to get my own way, but only what I was called out to do. If I were simply speaking on my own account, it would be empty, self-serving witness. But another, independent witness confirms me, the most reliable witness of all (God). Furthermore, you all heard and saw John, and he gave expert and reliable testimony about me, didn't he?

But my purpose is not to get your vote, and not to appeal to human testimony. I'm speaking to you this way so that you will be saved. John (the Baptist) was a torch, blazing and bright, and you were glad enough to dance for an hour or so in his bright light. But the witness who really confirms me (God) far exceeds John's witness. It's the work that God gave me to complete. These very tasks, as I go about completing them, confirm that God, in fact sent me. God who sent me, confirmed me. And you missed it! You never heard God's voice; you never saw God's appearance. There is nothing left in your memory of God's message because you do not take God's messenger seriously.

“Can You Hear Me Now...”
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EXPECTING Him, my door was open wide:
Then I looked round
If any lack of service might be found,
And saw Him at my side:
How entered, by what secret stair,
I know not, knowing only He was there.

~Collected works of T.E. Brown

Such a thing! Jesus suddenly there.

Jesus!

The presence of God without warning bursting into our hearts:

Oh my God!

The quiet silence of a moment filled with Spirit, heard, felt, touched deeply,
timelessly, without any effort on our part.

Awe...

If we were now to turn to one another and share what it was we felt and knew in our hearts, what might we say? How would we speak to each other about God – Father, Mother, Spirit, Wonder....what words or hand movements would you use? Give it a try...

And, what if you had no ability for external language – for some reason were unable to speak – would your eyes tell the story? How would they appear?

And, what if you just wanted others to know the joy you knew, the strength you felt, and the peace that comforted you...how would you communicate with others so that they would believe you.

Believe ***you***...

[Open to comments...]

Well, it's not easy. Let me say that first. It is really not very easy to express things in such a way that people believe you, trust you, put the belief and trust into action.

Even if they believe *you* believe, folks are often inclined to accept that, they still sometimes need to consider that you still might be wrong.

After all, how many hucksters are out there, trying to suck you in? How much misinformation are we bombarded with every minute from the powerful and multiple forms of media.

And much of it is powerful and persuasive.

I happened to listen to one of the afternoon “paid-for” televangelists when I got home from church last week. His whole appeal was based on a blessing he had for his audience. Simply, his blessing is that whatever he received they received.

What a nice blessing, I thought.

Then he smoothly moved into the calculus, asking for their money as seed money he called it, for the blessing they would receive a thousand times over. And he was specific. \$1,000 he wanted from 1000 people. Right. A million dollars. And if he got it, you were going to get it in your life, too.

I was blown-away stunned and angered a bit - by the logic and the intricate weaving of Scripture into his message, the preying on people in this way.

Yet, I found myself thinking, wouldn't it be nice if it were true.

I am sure that many who could and many who couldn't picked up the phone and pledged the money.

Caution. Cynicism. Skepticism. Mistrust. Mingled with communities of worship and leaders that haven't always lived up to the most honest of standards. Hearts that have once been softened...and then forced to harden with a promise to never ever be fooled again....

I don't think Jesus' time was all that different. So many people afraid, burned, afraid of being burned again.

And maybe we shouldn't feel so badly when we don't always succeed at first, second, third.... Look at Jesus. Clearly he was able to do certain things, offer “signs” (John's word for miracles) as witness to his relationship with God, Spirit, and the truth of his message and promises.

And still, many just could not hear the truth, could not see it, were unable to trust.

It frustrated Jesus, it had to. If anyone could have felt the suffering of others as he moved in his ministry, it was he.

But there were those who did believe...so much so that today 33% of the world's population identify themselves as Christian, nearly 2.1 billion people, and we are still having trouble agreeing on what that means.

For me, it becomes very simple in some ways. In its most basic form, if Jesus did it –

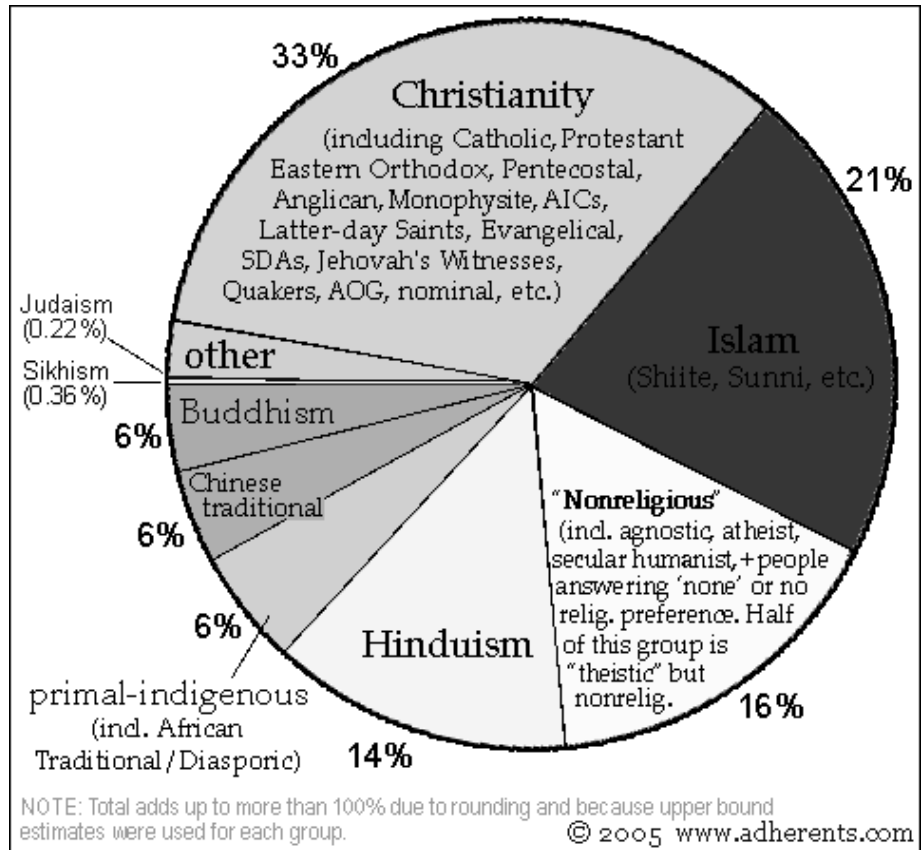
let's just keep doing it. No big interpretation, no required theological tomes to be read to figure it all out, just do it – and welcome others, even if they frustrate us...because God is always helping us.

Probably one of the most famous of modern ad campaigns is that of a major cell phone player that had a wandering technician in all sorts of situations, holding his phone to his ear saying, "Can you hear me now?"

At first, there he was, wandering by himself, in and out of places, above and below ground.

Have you noticed the change? Instead of "Can you hear me now," the technician rarely says anything. The tag image on the commercial, the last one you see, is the technician surrounded by the rest of the company, "The Network." No longer is it about the isolated individual but about the support and confidence that is gained in the broader company.

In some ways, the question "Can you hear me now," is more the line from the hymn: "...they will know we are Christians by our love..."



In the few short weeks I have been here, I am in the midst of love every day. It is the love of God embodied in this church that comes to life every day and shows people, shows them, who we are.

For the last couple of weeks, I have attended the Friday night dinners for our friends who are the homeless, poor, and lonely of our neighborhood and surrounding communities. Members of the Jan Hus Church, Holy Trinity Church, Central and Madison Avenue Presbyterian Churches and others come together to provide company and nourishment. It is a special gathering and you are invited to help and volunteer in any way you can.

At one point on Friday, one of the ladies from Central asked if I would say grace, which I was happy to do. I talked about God in the many ways that those who were gathered knew God. I promised them that all their paths and ways to God were valued and welcome. I suggested that the evidence of such grace was in the presence we shared with one another. And then we said, "Amen."

A while later, one of the ladies who is a volunteer who happened to be Jewish, asked me: "So, are you a new kind of minister?" And I smiled and laughed.

I asked her, "Well, what do you mean..."

She said, "Well, you're not wearing a collar or anything like that..."

I explained that in our tradition and in this church, in particular, we see all our members as ministers, with different gifts, working together – doing our best to be faithful to what we believe."

I could tell that didn't really clear things up; in fact, it might have confused things more – except for one thing:

Whatever I might have said, she saw the signs of what we do. The people were being honored and welcomed, the meals were being served, the love for sisters and brothers was all around in our actions.

Every day, we do such things. We do it as this remarkable community of Christian welcoming and outreach of Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House. We do it in our own lives, in the many ways we see and respond to God in the others we meet.

We still hear God, and we listen, and we strive to *love into action* our beliefs, just as Jesus did and continues to do through us, so that others may believe, too – not in us so much, but in the God they find in us that they know in themselves. It's what we do. These are some our signs.

Yesterday, I officiated at a wedding in Long Island. At the moment of the toast, the best man offered a prayer to his brother, the groom; it was Footprints in the Sand. I'm sure you know it. The following is what I believe to be the original version by Mary Stevenson, 1936, with Lord replaced by God...

Footprints in the Sand

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with [God].
Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.
In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand.
Sometimes there were two sets of footprints,
other times there was one only.

This bothered me because
I noticed that during the low periods of my life,
when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat,
I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to [God],

"You promised me [God], that if I followed you,
you would walk with me always.
But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life
there has only been one set of footprints in the sand.
Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?"

[God] replied, "The years when you have seen
only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you."

We are carried. It is the nature of God to carry us and our nature to need to be carried. Just as Jesus did, we go out into the world from this place and bring the God we know here to the others we are led to serve. There is no magic or magical words – there is just belief and action and trust in God.

Can you hear me now ...is not enough.

Can you **see** the signs that God does through others – that tells the story and that makes the difference in those hearts on their way to healing and peace.

As in Brown's poem, Jesus will find a way to be with us, appearing by our side – guiding us, carrying us, helping us...so that we can pass on to others what has been given to us. From there, well, God takes care of the rest.

There is no greater gift than to love and serve others in God's name. If anything will soften hearts and make a difference – that's what it is.