

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 26th Sunday after Pentecost, November 18, 2018.

Our lessons this morning raise an issue that can be a stumbling block for many people. And that is the division, the separation, between those who believe and those who do not. This issue of sheep and goats, as it were, has troubled me, and I suspect it has caught your attention as well. It certainly has troubled those who have left the church because of this suggested separation.

- The Book of Daniel (**Daniel 12:1-3**) puts it this way: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”
- **Psalms 16** uses different language to describe the division: “All my delight is upon the godly that are in the land ... but those who run after other gods shall have their troubles multiplied.”
- The Epistle to the Hebrews (**Hebrews 10:11-25**) has a slightly different way of describing separation: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.”
- In Mark’s gospel (**Mark 13:1-8**), Jesus contrasts those who believe that he, Jesus, is the One, and those who will be “led astray.”

In each instance, there is a division, a separation, that people bring about themselves. Believers and non-believers is one way to put it. In its harshest form, one has a choice: get on board the Jesus train, or stay at the station.

So, if the options are this clear-cut, why do so many people choose to stay at the station and perhaps take a different train or take no train at all? What’s the problem? We have a choice – a life here with God or a life here without God. And perhaps our choice, our decision, has a consequence: a life hereafter with God or a life hereafter without God.

At least, this is how the Christian Faith is sometimes presented. And this is also why the Christian Faith is questioned and sometimes rejected.

For me, and I suspect for many of you, this division, this separation, these clear-cut choices, don't reflect the complexity of human life. I simply don't believe that religious belief is as easy as yes or no. There is another option, and it starts – not finishes – with “maybe.”

Now, it is true that the “maybe” option is not terribly satisfying. Much more satisfying is to move from “maybe” to “I'm going to act as if it is so.” A first step, if you will. And what we find is that the more we commit to the “acting as if it is so” option, the more confident we feel and the closer to The Truth we feel.

This last piece is critical, for there is Truth with a capital T. We might not understand this Truth, but most people believe that Truth exists. Otherwise, why would we humans be driven to find it? The pursuit of Truth seems to be in our DNA.

If we were to gather a Jew, a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, and, yes, an atheist, and ask if Truth exists, most, if not all, would say yes. The difference is not whether Truth exists, but where can we find it. How do we get in touch with it? Or, perhaps, how does Truth get in touch with us?

For you and me, Truth with a capital T resides in Jesus of Nazareth. Not so for all, however. And that's because Truth with a capital T is too wide, too profound, for any one group or individual to grasp it with any kind of certainty.

Let's return to the “maybe” option and the notion of “acting as if it were so.” This is what you and I do. We clear the hurdle by proclaiming that we are in touch with the Truth because The Truth is in touch with us.

Like many before us, we give The Truth a Name, God. And we believe that this God engages the Creation in all sorts of ways, but chiefly in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. And the more we study this Jesus, the closer we get to him in prayer and action, the more confident we are that the “maybe” option is an excellent first step.

We don't get to this position of confidence easily or quickly. Maybe for some of you, confidence in Jesus as God incarnate came quickly. It hit you in a flash, and

you haven't looked back. The Jesus train was there waiting, and you took it, and are still taking it, and remain absolutely convinced that this is where you are meant to be.

Some of you, however, are making this journey more cautiously and more slowly. We might have elected the Jesus train at one point, and then de-trained. Or perhaps we never elected any train, much less the Jesus train. We are still wondering, still questioning, still not sure if this Jesus is the vehicle that we want for ourselves and those we love.

Or, as is the case for most of us, I suspect, we decided to give the Jesus train a try and found it worthy of trying more. And, as we traveled the Jesus train more, we grew in confidence that this is where we want to be and are meant to be.

At no point, however, did we ever believe that a right choice of trains is so fundamentally clear that anyone who doesn't elect it is out of luck in terms of salvation.

There are simply too many factors that go into religious belief. In today's gospel, Jesus speaks of "the beginning of birthpangs." The author of Hebrews recognizes "wavering" as a factor. And Daniel speaks of a "time of anguish," suggesting that decisions of life and death are never easy.

The point is simply that underlying one's religious decision are all sorts of experiences and circumstances and uncertainties. Very few things in this life are as simple as "I believe" or "I don't believe." Most of the time, we reach decisions of this magnitude not under threat of damnation or promise of salvation. We reach decisions that ring true to us based on our experiences and circumstances and uncertainties.

And remarkably, when these individual decisions are pooled, there develops a congregation like this one. People from different backgrounds believing that the best way to seek the Truth is to be open to the Truth seeking us. It's in that intersection, that engagement, that meeting, that possibility, that we are most comfortable.

It's a stimulating train. And what train would that be? It would be the Jesus train. Can you hear the announcement? All aboard. For Amtrak, these two words are a command. For the Church, these two words are an invitation to an exciting journey. And we're on it.

Amen.