

The Gospel of John, from which we started reading last week, and which we will be reading for the next four weeks, could well be called the “Gospel of Believing.” In 21 chapters, John uses the Greek word for “believe” or “believing” (*pistos* or *pisteuin*) no fewer than 98 times! It occurs more often in John’s Gospel than in Matthew, Mark and Luke combined. So, clearly, John believed in the importance of believing!

After feeding the multitude in the passage we heard last week, Jesus attempts to slip away, but the crowds catch up with him...again. They try to engage him in a discussion about good works: “What must we do, to do the works God requires?” But Jesus turns the conversation from *working* into *believing*. Even here, though, simple faith in Jesus as the One God has sent isn’t enough. They challenge Jesus to perform more miracles, show his stuff, so they may believe in him.

Of course, Jesus knows better than to do that. He knows that faith based on signs and wonders will be short-lived, so he turns the focus more *inward*. He gets them thinking about what lies under the surface – the Person *behind* the works. How he is called to this earth to be, not a miracle-worker, but their *sustenance*. “I am the bread of life,” he tells them. I need to be as basic to you as the very food you eat. He’s telling them something of which we, too, need a reminder. The heart of Christianity is not a *creed* but a *Person*.

The story is told of a man named Lepaux from France who was attempting to establish a new religion called theophilanthropy. Discouraged that his new religion wasn’t making converts, Lepaux sought the advice of the French diplomat, Talleyrand. After a moment of musing, Talleyrand suggests a surefire way to plant theophilanthropy in the hearts of the French people. If Lepaux would simply allow himself to be crucified and buried, and then return from the dead three days later, surely this new religion would catch on!

Talleyrand’s mocking answer contains a grain of truth. The church has amassed an impressive storehouse of theology and doctrine over the centuries. It would be foolish to dismiss the work of so many faithful minds, but it would be *worse* than foolish to forget that *ultimately* our faith is built not on ideas or philosophies, but on a Person – Jesus, the living Christ.

Not surprisingly, after Jesus concludes this sermon, many of those in the crowd turn away from him. Believing in Jesus is a risky, dangerous proposition. And, indeed, it was dangerous to be associated with the name of Jesus. The opponents of Christ would stop at nothing to bring down what he was doing. They accused him of everything from drunkenness and gluttony to sedition and blasphemy. The crowds who had eaten bread with Jesus did the sane and sensible thing: they deserted Jesus. They went home!

There is *still* danger in confessing the Name of Jesus. There is *still* risk in believing in Jesus – because believing is not merely a matter of saying the right words or endorsing the proper creed. Believing means *following* Jesus – living as he lived – working for the things Jesus worked for.

Remember how I told you at the outset that John uses the word for “believe” or “believing” almost 100 times in his Gospel? *Not once* did he turn that word into a noun – into “*belief*.” “Believing” was always a verb – always active – always something we *do*, not a set body of things we verbally assent to without putting that assent into action.

Perhaps you’ve heard the joke about the acrobat who was preparing to push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope stretched above Niagara Falls. Many of the onlookers shouted taunts and discouragements, but one spectator approached the tightrope and said, “Friend, I believe in you. I really believe you can do this!” At that the acrobat asked him, “Do you *really* believe?” “Yes, I really do!” “That’s wonderful,” said the acrobat, gesturing toward the empty wheelbarrow. “Hop in!”

You see, that’s what believing means in the Gospel of John. Believing is putting ourselves in the hands of Jesus even though it clearly is a risky and dangerous thing to do. Are you *really* ready, willing, and able to “hop into Jesus’ wheelbarrow”? That’s what we must do, if we are to do the works God requires of us.