

Blind Unbelief

A sermon preached at Second Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 6, 1997.
Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

One month ago 18 year old Melissa Drexler attended her senior prom with her date. During the prom she excused herself to go the rest room where she gave birth to a 6 pound, 6 ounce baby boy. She cut the umbilical cord with the edge of a sanitary-napkin receptacle, placed the baby in a garbage can, and returned to the dance floor. The teenage mother claims the baby was born dead but medical examiners say he was choked or suffocated. The so called "prom mom" is being charged with murder.^{The events suggest that} Melissa was involved in a major case of blind unbelief. Blind unbelief says, "You can't get pregnant the first time you have sex." Blind unbelief says, "I can't be single and pregnant." Blind unbelief says, "I could not have killed my baby. It must have been born dead." Blind unbelief is a terrible thing. It's as incredulous as blind faith.

Edmund Fuller writing in the Wall Street Journal years ago pointed out that more people have made fools of themselves by what they refused to believe than by what they would believe. "Any fool can see that the sun moves around the earth, Copernicus." "It'll never get off the ground, Orville." "That screwball is talking about people going to the moon." The opposite extreme from gullibility and blind faith is blind unbelief. Blind unbelief is every bit as superficial, simplistic, and foolish as blind faith. ~~Blind faith rejects Christ without ever giving him a chance.~~

Nearly forty years ago Yuri Gagarin the Russian Cosmonaut was the first man to orbit the earth. When he returned to earth he announced that he didn't see God up there. Schooled all his life

in atheism - how could he? Gagarin was a victim of blind, unthinking, unreflective, dogmatic unbelief. Blind unbelief doesn't allow a person to see God anywhere.

Blind unbelief can also betray our relationship to our children. Several years ago the 7th and 8th grade Sunday School students wrote a letter to their parents. In that letter they wrote, "Trust what we say. We don't always lie." Parents can get caught up in blind unbelief with respect to our children. Because we sometimes lie and because we sometimes catch our children in lies we have a tendency not to believe anything they say. Blind unbelief can undermine close relationships with our parents and children.

Blind unbelief can also wound our relationship with Christ. There's an occurrence of blind unbelief in our Gospel lesson. Jesus came to his home town where everybody knew him. He taught on the sabbath. What he said was like nothing they'd ever heard before. He spoke with authority. Many were astounded. People began to make sarcastic comments. "Where does he get this?" "Who does he think he is?" "He's just a carpenter - working class - what does he know?" Because they were so familiar with Jesus they could not and would not believe. ^{They believed in God, the Bible, God's promises ... but not that God was} And Mark tells us that Jesus "could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief."

Lamar Williamson writes, "The point is not that Jesus is impotent without our faith, for he did sometimes work wonders without reference to faith. On the other hand, the point is that the unbelief of Jesus' own people had a restrictive, dampening

effect on his work in their midst.... The clear implication is that if they had believed in him Jesus could have done a great deal more."

God in Christ can do a great deal more among us if we could move beyond blind unbelief in the power and will of Christ to do wonderful things among us. One of the greatest sources of blind unbelief is what Peter Berger calls ^{MA-DERNITY} "modernity". I once heard Tom Long explain the effects of modernity ^{in his own ministry.} He said, "One afternoon I went to visit a church family. Only the wife was home. We had a conversation. This family had a son with cerebral palsy. On previous visits to the home the other children would be in the family circle but John always stood outside the circle and watched like he didn't really belong. But that afternoon she told me about a remarkable experience she had a few days before. ... She'd been sitting in the living room knitting and John was at the end of the hall playing. She felt some kind of presence in the room. She looked down the hall and saw Jesus with his arms around John. 'I looked away,' she said, 'and then back again and saw only John.'" And she told Dr. Long, "I felt for the first time in my life that John was included in the love of God and my love." What she's done with that experience is go out into her community and start programs to help victims of cerebral palsy.

And then Tom Long said, "I immediately suspected hallucinatory experiences. I immediately psychologized her experience. I did what modernity teaches me to do with religious experience. I reduced her vision of Jesus and attempted to explain it without any reference to God." We live in a time that delegitimizes religious

experience. Blind unbelief drains our religious experience of any reference to God or Christ. We don't see God at work because our culture has the capacity to drain religious experience of any transcendent reference point.

Blind unbelief can be a real killer. We look at our community and see drugs and teenage pregnancy and alcohol abuse and school drop outs and broken homes and we throw our hands up in despair. What can we do? We can't do anything. Blind unbelief puts a damper on any attempt to reform a community and allow Christ to do wonderful things among us.

Blind unbelief also kills our personal spiritual life. Many of us at times are burdened with a sense of failure. Perhaps like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* you no longer believe that your life has made a difference or can make a difference. We say, "Christ would have to work a miracle to change me." But we don't believe he will. We don't believe he can. And we do nothing to. Blind unbelief quenches the work of the Spirit of Christ among us.

We need to hear more testimonies like Jill Townsend's a month ago that enable us to see that God is working among us and in us. We need to hear how Christ has worked miracles in our lives, in our marriages, in our families. We need to hear so that, maybe, our blind unbelief may be blown away by the reality of Christ's presence among us.

This past year the Presbyterian Church USA lost another 33,000 members. We've lost over 30,000 members a year for 35 years - one quarter of all our members. Some people take pride in those losses saying they're a sign of our faithfulness to the Gospel. I don't

agree. I do agree with Robert Weingartner in an editorial in last week's Presbyterian Outlook. "Recent studies" he says, "have confirmed that our denomination is... a 'weak' religious body in that it has failed to articulate and share with others compelling teaching about the ultimate purpose and destiny of humankind." |

We're more successful at communicating what we don't believe than what we do believe. We're not like those fundamentalists. We don't believe in a seven day creation. We don't believe in a literal Adam and Eve. We don't believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. We don't believe in altar calls. We don't believe in speaking in tongues. We don't believe in getting too emotional. Some of us don't believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead. We're good at proclaiming what we don't believe. Somehow we must get beyond talking about what we don't believe and begin to articulate persuasively and passionately the Gospel - that Christ is alive and among us to do wonderful things.

(see an image of Del²)

Blind unbelief will keep Christ from helping us. ^ Jane Hamilton's novel, The Book of Ruth,^{It} tells the story of a woman named Ruth. When Ruth was a baby her father left Ruth, her mother, her baby brother Matthew. There's evidence that Ruth is really a quite bright girl but her mother has become a cynical, bitter and abusive woman. She squashes Ruth's spirit like a bug. She puts down Ruth as stupid and worthless. Perhaps because of this Ruth ceases to believe in herself or in her worth and she ceases to believe in God or Christ. She falls prey to the destructive power of blind unbelief. She ends up in a disastrous marriage.

In a letter sent to his Aunt shortly after Ruth's disastrous marriage, Matthew, her brother, writes, "You ask me what we can do to make life easier, better for Ruth. I honestly can think of nothing.... I know of nothing we can do." How sad. The Gospel lesson suggests that Jesus sometimes says to his father, "You ask me what we can do to make life easier, better for my family. I honestly can think of nothing, nothing we can do because of their unbelief."

Christ comes to us today. He's present with us. What will we do with him? He sees where we need to be healed. He wants to help us. He wants to do wonderful things in and through us. He wants us to put away blind unbelief and believe in him - not with a blind faith but with a mature active faith that we've fought through to. I want just one person to put aside their blind unbelief in Christ's power to change us and let Christ begin to work his power in and through us and our congregation.

Let us pray: