

## Homily for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

Today we're going to start our homily with a little game. Don't worry – it's easy, and we should have some fun too. Here's how it goes. I'm going to say a word, and then you tell me what the opposite is. Ready? Let's start with an easy one first: "UP" ("DOWN"); "NEAR" ("FAR"); "HAPPY" ("SAD"). You're good at this game! OK, let's step it up a notch. Ready? "JOYFUL" ("SORROWFUL"); "RELAXED" ("STRESSED OUT"). How about – "BELIEF"? Here's a hint – it's not "DISBELIEF". Any takers? Well if not, we'll come back to it in just a little bit.

In our Gospel today, taken from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of John, the word "believe" is used 5 times. Now that might not seem very revolutionary to you; but to put it in perspective, the word "of" is only used 3 times in the course of this 8-verse discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus, the Pharisee! So, do you think Jesus might be trying to tell Nicodemus that belief has to be a MAJOR part of the lives of those who would be His disciples? Yes, of course! And to emphasize this importance of belief, John goes on to write a verse that has become very well-known in our times. He says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who **believes** in him might not perish but might have eternal life." Lo and behold, there's that word "believe" again.

But if I were to go out on the street and ask the average person what they think the word believe means, they'd probably say something like: "to accept as true, genuine, or real" – at least that's what Merriam Webster's says. And I'm not going to argue with the dictionary, because that's right – at least from a grammatical and literary point of view.

Again, if I'd go out on the street, maybe a little after church services let out and ask some of our Evangelical Protestant brothers and sisters, what they think the word "believe" means, they might say something like "a mental assent to Christ, [by which] one could be assured of eternal security and a guaranteed place in heaven" – at least that's what one former Baptist said before he became Catholic. And again, I'm not going to argue really – because that definition is getting even closer.

But my friends, belief goes deeper than this. From the faith perspective, at least the one Jesus Himself is coming from, belief is more than just accepting as true something we cannot prove or see. In other words, belief is more than just knowing something and agreeing with it. In the Gospel passage today, the word translated five times as "believe" is actually a Greek word, which carries with it the added notion of obedience as well. This means that belief is not fully belief unless there is *obedience* to the God who is being believed in!

My brothers and sisters, in the Nicene Creed we say every week: “I believe in God the Father...I believe in Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son...I believe in the Holy Spirit...I believe in the holy Catholic Church...etc., etc.” But it is not enough for salvation to have a mere mental adherence to these facts of our faith. Rather, we have to become so convinced of these truths we believe in that we seek to live them out; in short, that they become part of our life!

Now, it’s true that we cannot be saved by our own good deeds – Jesus alone can save us. But it’s also true that we cannot be saved merely by our own believing. Simply believing that Jesus is Lord – simply believing that He’s the Savior of the world – simply believing – while we hold on to our own way of doing things – is not enough. Rather, it’s by the grace that God freely gives us, that we must cooperate with in our lives, which ultimately leads us to salvation. And this is what St. Paul means in our second reading today when he says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God...” It’s God’s grace which enables us to believe in Him to such a degree that we choose to leave behind our sinful way of doing things, and journey wholeheartedly with Christ to the Kingdom of God.

So in conclusion, let's go back to the word "belief" and see if we can't figure out its opposite. Again the opposite of "belief" is not "disbelief". I would say it's more like "disobedience". We can say we believe in God all we want. But if we don't obey God's commands, and instead carry out our own wills, we really don't possess the type of belief God is calling us to in the first place. And that's why we each need Lent, because we're not perfect, and we all have things to work on, and we continually need God's forgiveness. So, as we continue our celebration of this Eucharist, and welcome the Savior into our midst, we profess our belief in Him, and ask for the grace to live that belief out this week. God bless you.