

LOVING GENEROUSLY SERIES

First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford

October 9, 2016

Beyond Belief

Genesis 15:1-6

John 14:1-6

1. A man approaches the flight check in counter, drops his three bags and looks at the agent who says, “to where would you like me to check your bags?”
 - a. The man says, “this one is going to Dubai, this one is going to Tokyo and this one is going to Las Vegas.”
 - b. “I’m sorry sir. Your bags can only go to the destination to which you are traveling.”
 - c. “Why not? That’s where they went the last time you lost them?”
 - i. We all experience loss – big and small.
 - ii. A much bigger loss is that of a loved one and it is at many of those times when we hear Jesus say these familiar words: Let not your hearts be troubled.
 - d. So much of our lives are transient and fleeting.
 - i. Vacations end, sand castles melt with the tide, kids grow up, institutions come and go, people move out of our neighborhoods and our lives, family members die.
 - ii. And so we vainly attempt to make our own lives eternal, our nation infinite, and our causes everlasting.
 1. We search for something to believe so we need not deal with loss.
 - a. After all, nobody likes loss, losing or being a LOSER.
 - e. The specter of loss is what drives much of our anger, fear and poor choices.



- i. Loss comes in many forms.
 - 1. Loss is not limited to loss of life, though that is the most lasting manifestation.
 - f. There is lost stuff:
 - i. Think for example how crazed many of us would feel losing our phones or how upset a toddler is when she misplaces a favorite toy.
 - ii. Loss can also refer to foods that are perishing.
 - 1. The same Greek word (apollymi) is translated as perishable manna in John 6 and as loss in other places in the New Testament.
 - g. Loss can also be felt in our own performance or in competitions.
 - i. We all know how seriously we take sporting events or professional setbacks.
 - h. Loss can be felt when we feel as if aspects of life are beyond our control.
 - i. We feel loss if opportunity knocks and we don't answer.
 - j. Many of us struggle daily with loss of our memory for names, concepts or information.
 - k. We feel at a loss when our routines are disrupted.
 - l. Our health or abilities may be lost or compromised.
 - m. Relationships are fertile grounds for loss.
 - i. Friendships falter, couples divorce, children and teachers part at the end of the school year.
 - n. And we can experience emotional losses that rock our self-identity.
 - i. We can lose patience, confidence, comfort, trust, security, respect, hope, or our sense of humor.
2. In the midst of all this loss, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled."
- a. What would free our hearts from this trouble?
 - i. The world tells us "believe..." in many different inspirational posters, cards, and wall art.
 - 1. All things are possible if you believe.

2. If you believe it, you can achieve it.
 3. Always believe something wonderful is about to happen.
 4. Even Walt Disney, through Cinderella, assures us our hearts won't be troubled...
 - a. If you keep believing, the dream that you wish will come true – Cinderella.
- b. When I hear so-called inspirational sayings like that, I want to ask, believe what?
- i. In one form or another, the world tells us we are to believe in ourselves.
 1. From the time we are kids, the author of Winnie the Pooh says: Promise me you'll always remember: You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. A. A. Milne (1882-1956) Winnie the Pooh
 2. Our sports heroes try to pump us up with this platitude: Venus Williams says, "Some people say I have attitude - maybe I do... but I think you have to. You have to believe in yourself when no one else does - that makes you a winner right there."
 - a. Venus Williams (1980-present)
 3. Business leaders seek to inspire greater productivity: Steve Jobs said: Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it.
Steve Jobs 1955-2011
 4. Even Presidents and Pastors tell us to believe in ourselves:
 - a. Believe you can and you're halfway there.
Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919)

- c. We go on to say I believe in the Holy Ghost, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.
 - i. We rattle these things off by memory, using our minds.
 - ii. What is the greatest distance in the world?
 - 1. The distance between what the brain believes and on what our heart hinges.
- 3. Bridging big distances was the specialty of a man named Charles Blondin.
 - a. About 150 years ago (1859), he was at the peak of his game and was even more famous than the Wallendas for his tight rope walking.
 - b. He came to the United States from France wanting to cross Niagara Falls.
 - i. He strung a hemp cord 1100 feet across and 160 feet above Niagara Falls.
 - ii. He was quite a showman.
 - iii. A crowd of 100,000 people gathered to watch him cross inch by inch, step by step.
 - iv. He had no safety net.
 - 1. And yet, he crossed safely.
 - v. Tons of people were taking pictures of him so he borrowed a camera, crossed again and took pictures of them taking pictures of him!
 - vi. He went another time taking a chair with him, balanced the chair on the rope and stood on the chair.
 - vii. He went back yet another time and took a wheelbarrow.
 - 1. He turned to the crowd and asked them, “Do you believe I can do this?”
 - a. Of course, they all shouted they believed he could do it.

2. Then he asked them, “Now who will get into the wheelbarrow?”
 - a. It got really quiet.
 - b. All 100,000 people were silent.
 - c. One man, Harry Colcord, knew Blondin.
 - i. He had worked with him.
 - ii. He had seen Blondin cross the tightrope 100 times.
 - iii. He got into the wheelbarrow and they went inch by inch, step by step.
 - iv. Can you imagine that ride?
 - v. In a wheelbarrow, over Niagara Falls?
 - vi. They made it to the other side.
 - vii. The crowd went wild.
 - viii. Everybody applauded Charles Blondin but only one man believed him.¹
3. When we commit to believing in God, really commit to getting into God’s metaphoric wheelbarrow, we are simultaneously prepared to receive God’s gift of faith.
 - a. Our heart hinges on the love of God.
 - b. The letter to the Hebrews (11:1) defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
 - c. One of our early church leaders, Saint Augustine says, “Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.” Saint Augustine (354-430)
4. So if believing is the verb we do, all in to the wheelbarrow, and faith is the noun we receive as a gift, how does this help our hearts not to be troubled?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Blondin Accessed October 3, 2016.

- a. Do you think Charles Blondin just walked across a wire one day?
 - i. Of course not, he came from a family of circus performers.
 - ii. He practiced walking wires, higher and higher wires, time after time, year after year.
- b. Can we just say we believe in God and expect God to grant our wishes to our troubled hearts like a genie?
 - i. Of course not.
 - ii. We have to practice the verb of our believing in God.
- c. Take the example of the story of Abram we read this morning.
 - i. God appears to Abram in a vision telling Abram “don’t be afraid, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”
 - ii. Abram laments to God how he remains childless and therefore has no legitimate heir.
 - iii. God shows Abram the heavens and asks him to count the stars if he can.
 - 1. God then tells Abram his heirs will be just as innumerable.
 - iv. And the text says, “Abram believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”
 - 1. What do you think? Does Abram’s belief seem sudden?
 - 2. What we don’t know is the three chapters preceding Chapter 15 where God has been testing Abram and Abram has consistently been practicing his belief in God.
 - 3. When the Lord reckoned it to Abram as righteousness, the Hebrew word for righteousness, tzedekah, is translated into the Greek as pistis, the word we translate as faith.
 - v. Abram has been practicing his believing through famine, deception, betrayal, captivity and war!

1. And we know that Abraham and Sarah eventually have Isaac, who has Jacob, who has the 12 tribes of Israel and all of their descendants more numerable than the stars in the sky.
5. Belief and faith can also be thought of as chickens and eggs.
 - a. Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?
 - i. One can make a credible case for both answers.
 - b. Which comes first: receiving the gift of faith or believing in God?
 - c. Both questions don't have easy, verifiable answers that suit everyone or every situation.
 - d. But asking the questions leads us to make and test hypotheses, putting into practice that which we seek to accomplish.
 - e. The very practice strengthens the outcome and serves as its own reward.
 - i. Perhaps you have heard the saying "Work as if it all depends on you; pray as if it all depends on God."
 1. (variously attributed to Ignatius or Augustine)
 - f. Our hearts are not troubled when our being is interacting with God.
 - i. The world tells us Believe or Believe in Yourself
 1. Jesus tells us "Believe in God."
 - a. And in so doing, "Be you."