

## WHAT MATTER MOST: A RATIONAL FAITH

*A Sermon by  
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*Mark 9:38-50*

Good morning. I'm Barbara Mraz, a deacon in the diocese and Writer-in-Residence at St. John the Evangelist in St. Paul. As a deacon here for 20 years, this always feel like coming home

If asked, how would you describe your religious faith? Would you say that you're a Christian? Or would you be more comfortable saying "Episcopalian"? Maybe you would just say you're a member of St. John's or you're spiritual and only a little religious?

There are some parallels between religion and relationships. I've had people tell me there must be a reason I choose the relationships I do, like it says something about my inner self that I should "deal with." Well, it's not like there's a smorgasbord, of say, possible partners lined up and you say, "All things considered, I'll take number four, Bob."

And few of us choose a religion by lining up our available options, creating lists of pros and cons for each, and then making an almost mathematical decision to be an Anglican or a Buddhist or a Baptist (actually, you can probably find a Facebook test for this). Logical reasoning is not what usually brings us to church or keeps us there. But to *remain* a part of a religious tradition, that tradition can't *insult* your logical mind or be incompatible with reality, as you know it.

Today's Gospel from Mark talks about the danger of stumbling blocks, those things that trip us up in our attempts to be people of faith. I'll discuss two things that are stumbling blocks for many of us, and then how these stumbling blocks might be removed. One of the things that *matters most to me* is that my religious faith has intellectual credibility and that I do not have to turn off my rational mind when I walk into a church.

One stumbling block is the idea proclaimed in a very large part of Christianity that it is only by believing in Jesus that we are saved. So now I'd like to pivot from Mark to John and the key verses in Scripture that address this.

Of course one is John 3:17 "*Those who believe in (Jesus) are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already.*" The twin sister to this passage is John 14:6: "*Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but by me.'*" I call these the "Jesus-only" verses. They are widely quoted and they are stumbling blocks for me.

If some kind of belief is the litmus test for our eternal souls, certain questions arise: How much belief is required to get into heaven? How much doubt keeps you out? Can you *will* yourself to believe? Will God know if you're faking? Some days you believe, some days you don't.

Also it is clear that the Jesus-Only verses are incompatible with the inclusive Jesus we meet in the rest of the Gospels. The Jesus who blesses those who are "poor in spirit" --- perhaps doubting, troubled confused. The Jesus who is patient and gentle with doubting Thomas, giving him the proof he needs by showing him his hands and his side. The Jesus who heals, comforts, advocates, loves, challenges, gets upset, but does not spend much

if any time talking about the requirement of belief. The Jesus who says, “*Do this*” in remembrance of me,” not *believe this*.

We are right to be troubled by this theology, but like good Minnesotans, we usually blame ourselves for just not getting it!

A second stumbling block is an insistence on keeping our faith at a distance. Maybe we want to keep our options open, or we doubt how much faith we really have.

The writer Christian Wimans, after a wrenching physical battle with cancer and an intense intellectual battle with Christianity, concluded, “*When I assented to the faith that was latent within me, I discovered that it had been blooming impossibly year after parched year in me, surviving the seasons of my unbelief.... Perhaps it is not disbelief which at least is active and conscious that destroys a person but unacknowledged belief or a need for belief so strong that it is continually and silently crucified on the crosses of science, humanism, art, or ....the overweening self.*”

So today I will attempt to confess the faith that is within me. This is daunting because it’s not something Episcopalians generally do. But I will tell you some of the reasons why I am a Christian in the hopes that something I say or have lived may give you courage to articulate your own journey. Faith becomes more real when we say it out. I am not witnessing for *Jee-zuss*, but for Jesus. I offer the evidence of the heart.

I am a Christian because I need a philosophy to live by, and I don’t want to make it up as I go along. Sometimes art has been my religion and the Bible of Shakespeare or some sublime music or breathtaking poetry that carries me along for quite a while but art is not relational – it is a *thing* and not a you or a thou, as Martin Buber would say. Dozens of times I have cited

these words by the poet T.S. Eliot who became a Christian late in life and said he did so because “poetry will not bear the weight of a life.” I get that.

I am a Christian because I think that Jesus of Nazareth was a real live person and I to know this Jesus is to know what God is like. I also believe there are other paths to God and it is outrageous and naïve and rude to think otherwise.

I am a Christian because I was born into it. Baptized as a child, instructed in the faith by good people who preached Jesus and honored God and who, though they didn’t know it, gave me the questions to ask to facilitate my transition to the next step.

I am a Christian because I was brought to church as a child.

I am a Christian because of St. James Lutheran Church-Wisconsin Synod-- and steadfast pastors, and memorizing Bible verses and the tender blessing of the choir sung at the end of each service that still rests lightly on my soul:

*“The Lord bless you and keep you  
The Lord make his face to shine upon you  
And be gracious unto you  
The Lord lift his countenance upon you  
And give you peace.”*

I am a Christian because of parentally-inflicted guilt, which brought me back to church after ten years away to get my daughters baptized. It was an Episcopal Church in my then- neighborhood in south Minneapolis -- it was here, actually -- and then some stuff happened and I found myself in a pulpit and I’m still here, surprising myself as much as anyone.

I’m a Christian because the Cross is an embodiment of the pain and suffering of the world caused by separation – no comforting circle of life

here but two jagged lines hammered together in the middle. In a world full of pain and horror, and poverty and illness, the Cross acknowledges that life can be horrible and God gets that, allowing one of his own beloved children, to suffer and die as a statement of solidarity with every suffering person. Whoever has had a son or a daughter or has been a sister or a brother knows there could be no more wrenching image than this.

I am a Christian because of the empty tomb and the Resurrection which I believe really happened because I see it in the second chances, the fresh starts, the healings, the rhythm of life and death in the natural world and in my own life. I am a Christian because I see resurrection in perennial gardens and robins returning and the feeling I always get at funerals that it is not the end.

I am a Christian because it's my story.

I'm a Christian because I have not been able to avoid the force in my life that won't let me go.

I am a Christian because of St Francis and the animals and Pope Francis and his late night visits to the poor.

And because of the Prodigal Son who screwed up big time and was welcomed home with the biggest party ever by his smiling father with his open arms and because of the woman at the well and how Jesus told her everything she ever did and it was okay and because of the woman who poured the expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair and the beauty of that gesture and the *art* of it.

I am a Christian because of Stephen Charleston and Mariann Budde – bishops whose eloquence and clarity take my breath away and because of Barbara Brown Taylor and Frederick Buechener, and all of the dead writers who throw me lifelines from the grave.

I am a Christian because nothing in the world is more powerful than love and Christianity says love wins. It may take 30 seconds or 30 years but love will win.

I am a Christian because of the St Olaf College choir singing their signature song, “Beautiful Savior” and the memory of my mother’s face as she listened. The fair Lord Jesus, the beautiful savior, was enough for her. I no longer judge her for this. Or myself.

I am a Christian because the stumbling blocks *can be* removed.

I am a Christian because I think I would be lost without it.

Of course that’s not all of it, but it’s a start. But as Marilyn Robinson writes at the end of her novel *Gilead*, “*It all means more than I can tell you. So you must not judge what I know by what I find words for.*”

Amen.

Christian Wimans, *My Bright Abyss*, 2013.