



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Just Believe

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Russell
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And Jesus said, "Do not be afraid. Just believe."

"Do not be afraid. Just believe." Those were the words that jumped off the page at me when I sat down weeks ago to get an uncharacteristically early start on this morning's sermon. So I happily knuckled down and got a big chunk done of what was shaping up to be a pretty good reflection on "Do not be afraid." I found some great quotes from everyone from Isaiah to Nelson Mandela ... and even a super illustration about "the science of fear" I learned from the rector – about how the blood goes from one part of your brain to another when you're immobilized by fear and you end up acting like a reptile living in a house of fear rather than the mammal living in the house of love you were created to be.

Well, so much for planning ahead. If you were in a pew here last week, you'll already know that Ed preached a boffo "do not be afraid" sermon ... and if you *weren't* here for some reason, when you go home -- just a click away on the All Saints website -- you'll be able to hear Ed Bacon explain the science of fear for yourself.

Anyway, it was back to the drawing board for me – and in the process my focus shifted from the "do not be afraid part" to the "just believe" part of Jesus' words in this morning's gospel of Mark.

JUST believe. Right. Putting "just" and "believe" together reminds me of my dad and one of his cardinal rules that there were some words that just NEVER worked next to each other. Like "only" ... followed by a dollar amount. Any dollar amount. There was no such thing as "only" five dollars ... or ten, or twenty ... to my raised-in-the-Great-Depression-Daddy.

Just believe. Just believe what? Just believe IN what? A person? A book? A creed? A doctrine or dogma? And what if I'm believing the wrong thing? Or the wrong way. It turns out there's nothing "just" about the "just" in "Just believe."

These are precisely the kinds of questions that have been wrestled with by the 32 new members we welcome into the work and witness of All Saints Church today. Five of those new members will be baptized this morning and each and every one of them has their own story of the journey they've taken to get to this day – this moment – this decision to say "I believe."

And for many, the challenge to "just believe" has been a big one – because it is not just about trusting the promise of God's inclusive love proclaimed from this pulpit – it is about erasing the tapes of God's demands and judgment still echoing in their ears in the ghosts of sermons past.

So here's my message to those new members ... and to any old members or "not yet" members wanting to listen in:

Do not be afraid. Just believe.

Just believe that whoever you are and wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, there IS a place for you here. **Just believe** that we do *indeed* belong to a God of abundance whose Good News is a message of hope rather than fear offered to us by the One who created us, redeemed us and sustains us. **Just believe** that there IS enough – as we have been told over and over and *over* again, through the prophets and apostles – and through our Lord Jesus Christ ... the one who called us to embrace God's abundance and live joyfully out of it just as he did in his ministry here on earth: the feeding of the 5000, the lilies of the field, the miracle of the water turned to wine at the wedding in Cana: all demonstrations of God's desire to give us more than we ask for and all that we need.

And it doesn't stop there. God's abundance extends to those less tangible needs: needs for love, for blessing, for hope, for healing. "Do not be afraid. Just believe," Jesus said to Jairus – father of the little girl who lay either dying or dead: depending on who you listened to. "Do not be afraid, just believe" -- not in the words of the doomsayers who surrounded him saying "it's too late – give up" but believe instead in the abundance of God's love and healing – believe that it's NEVER too late – to love ... to hope ... to heal.

Do not fear. Just believe. That's my message to our new members – and to anybody else listening in. And here's my chance to weave in one of those quotes I had picked out for the sermon that got left on the cutting room floor ... a poem from Nelson Mandela's 1994 Inaugural Address written by Marianne Williamson:

*Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate,
but that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light -- not our darkness -- that frightens us.
We ask ourselves,
"Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented and fabulous?"
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking
so that other people won't feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.
It is not just in some; it is in everyone.
And, as we let our own light shine,
we consciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

Do not be afraid. Just believe.

The challenge to claim those words as our own ... to live into the freedom from fear that liberates us to liberate others ... is not just a message for our new members here at All Saints Church

this morning ... it is a message for our whole church as it prepares to gather for General Convention next month.

Do not be afraid. Just believe.

There is another important healing story in the gospel according to Mark – the one about the paralyzed man on the mat brought by his friends to Jesus for healing. They had to dig through the roof and lower him down into the house where Jesus was teaching, but when they did, he said to the man “*their faith has made you whole – get up and walk*” – and he did.

As we journey toward Anaheim and the decisions that will be made about the mission and ministry of the Episcopal Church at our 76th General Convention, like Jairus we, too, are met on the road – or in the email inbox or on the blogs -- by those who say, “It is too late – give up: the church has gone as far as it will go -- the bishops aren’t going to let anything happen – let’s just *study* it all for awhile longer.” That, my brothers and sisters, is the “fear factor” that threatens to paralyze this church of ours on issues of justice, compassion and inclusion. And **we** are the ones with the power to **not** give those voices power over us.

Because I **JUST believe** that our call in these fearful times is to speak the same words of hope and abundance to the anxious church on the road to Anaheim that Jesus spoke to the anxious father on the road to his daughter’s bedside, “Do not be afraid. Just believe.”

And I believe the work in ahead of us in Anaheim is like unto the challenge faced by those faithful friends who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus for healing. Blocked from going in the front door, they had to rearrange a little architecture to get to Jesus – but they persevered. And so will we – even if we have to rearrange a few things in the process. Because at the end of the day, I **JUST BELIEVE** that it is **our** faith that can make the church whole – it is our faith that can get it up off its mat of paradigm paralysis and help it walk again forward into God’s future in mission and ministry. I **JUST BELIEVE** that we – the LGBT baptized and our valiant straight allies -- are not a problem to be solved. We are a solution to be mobilized.

Do not be afraid. Just believe.

Verna Dozier, the prophetic biblical scholar and Anglican theologian wrote, “*Doubt is not the opposite of faith: fear is. Fear will not risk that even if I am wrong, I will trust that if I move today by the light that is given me, knowing it is only finite and partial, I will know more and different things tomorrow than I know today, and I can be open to the new possibility I cannot even imagine today.*” [Dozier, “The Dream of God”]

Jesus didn’t call us to be “right” – he called us to be faithful. He called us to walk in love – with him and with each other. He reassures us – like he did those gathered at the bedside of Jairus’ daughter – with the same invitation and challenge: do not be afraid. Just believe. Believe in the power of love to cast out fear. Believe in the historic Anglican tradition we inherit which can and will provide for us the “elbow room” we need to include all who seek to love and serve our Lord – all who desire to be fed by the holy food and drink of new and unending life we will soon share around this altar – all who seek to both be vehicles of God’s blessing and messengers of God’s abundant love.

Do not be afraid. Just believe. Amen