

The faces of unbelief

John 7:1-6, 10-13, 19-24, 32, 40-52

March 4, 2007

He came to his own people, but his own people did not receive him ... some, however, did receive him and believed in him, and through their faith in him they found life.

He stills comes to his own people. He still comes to us. And his own people still do not receive him. But some do. Some do receive him, some do believe in him, and through their faith in him, they find life.

What about you? Have you received him? Do you believe in him? Have you found life?

Unbelief has many faces ...

There are the self-assured faces of the scoffers. They are confident in their own grasp of the way the universe works, suspicious of anything outside the box of their own flawless logic. They are scornful of superstitious people. They have no use for children's stories or wishful thinking. And they are trapped, trapped in the prison of their own truncated imaginations, deprived of the joy of unexpected beauties and unfathomable mysteries.

Then there are the preoccupied faces of those who have better things to do. They have no time to rest, no time to listen. They know what they want or what they have been told they are supposed to want, and they are constantly running after it. There is always more to do, always more to get, never enough time for work, never enough time for play, and no time for the One who says, *I am the way*. They are too busy chasing after life to see it where it really is, to see it how it really is, and to see the One who offers it.

Then there are the indignant faces of those who are offended. They are good people or at least they like to think of themselves as good people. They even suppose they might have been believers, were it not for all the people that fill the churches -- all those shallow people, all those hypocritical people, all those judgmental people, all those people who do not practice what they so eagerly preach. They are so turned off by the sight of those who need saving that they fail to see beyond them and through them to the One who is saving, and they turn away from the One who can save them.

Unbelief has many faces, and sometimes you will find some of them in surprising places. Sometimes you find them here, in the churches, even among those who call themselves Christians. He came to his own people, to his own family, to people of his own race, his own heritage, his own religion, and they did not receive him.

They said: The Messiah will not come from Galilee! No prophet ever comes from Galilee!

They know better. They know all about the Messiah, where he will come from, what he will do, what he will be like. They know so much about the Messiah, they don't even need one! They are content with running their own affairs while they wait for the Messiah who never comes. Jesus is there, the One sent from God is there,

standing in front of them, speaking of glorious things, healing broken people, forgiving shattered people, giving hope to hopeless people, and they can't see him because they already know all about the Messiah!

They are the pillars of the church, the guardians of its traditions, the most loyal of its supporters, but they are suspicious of anything outside the box of their own flawless logic. They are unprepared to hear God speak through the words and deeds of Jesus, just as sometimes we are unprepared to hear God speak through the new words and unexpected deeds of Jesus' followers.

God is still speaking! But if we have already figured out for ourselves everything God has said or is bound to say, then we have stopped listening! Instead of believing in Jesus, instead of listening and looking and following wherever it is Jesus may want to lead us now, we are content with preserving the edifice of someone else's faith.

Jesus said: *Why are you angry with me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?*

They were angry because Jesus didn't follow the rules! Jesus didn't stay inside the boundaries. He did work on the Sabbath. He healed a man on the Sabbath.

He healed a man! They are so offended, so turned off, by one who would dare cross the lines ... to heal a man! But they will circumcise a boy on the Sabbath. They will do that work because it is God's work. Healing is not God's work?

Sometimes we guard the boundaries too carefully. We know what belongs in the church and what doesn't. We know who belongs in the church and who doesn't. Everybody just needs to follow the rules and our church will continue to be the nice church it has always been. Instead of believing in Jesus, instead of doing whatever work Jesus calls us to do now, we are content with doing what we have always done.

Jesus' brothers said: *People don't hide what they are doing if they want to be well known.*

Not even Jesus' brothers believed in him. But this face of unbelief is different. It looks very much like belief, like loyalty, like enthusiastic support.

*We've got to get this movement going! We've got to reach a larger audience!
You've got to be seen Jesus!*

It looks very much like belief, but it is unbelief. It is unbelief because it doesn't believe Jesus, because it doesn't listen to Jesus, because it doesn't recognize what Jesus' mission truly is. Jesus' mission is not to be well-known, but to make God known, not to gain notoriety, but to give people God's gift of life.

Sometimes we may be confused about Jesus' mission. Sometimes we may even forget that it is Jesus' mission, not ours! Sometimes we may aim to be well-known, to be successful, to enlarge our audience, instead of aiming where Jesus aims, to make God known. I am disturbed by churches whose zeal for Jesus seems to have little to do with actually listening to Jesus and much to do with using Jesus to build something impressive, to build something that will impress the world. This too is one of the faces of unbelief.

Unbelief has many faces, but with all of their differences, the faces of unbelief have this in common: they are all grim. They are offended, indignant, smug, angry, impatient, demanding, complaining faces.

But the face of belief is like this: *He told me everything I have ever done!* It is the face of joy: *He knows me, and he knows ... God!* Belief welcomes Jesus. Belief listens to him, belief receives him, belief follows him, and belief enjoys the wondrous gift it receives from him ... life.