

In the movie *Leap of Faith* Steve Martin plays the role of the Reverend Jonas Nightengale, a slick-as-oil traveling evangelist who knows how to work a crowd with fake miracles and healings. He knows no ethical bounds and gladly sells salvation for a donation to his "ministry." When his tour bus breaks down in impoverished Rustwater, Kansas Jonas has to wait for the repairs. He decides to set up his tents and see what he can fleece from the natives.

The local sheriff is on to Jonas' schemes and tries to shut the show down before he makes off with too much of the locals' money. In the midst of all the smoke and mirrors healings a local boy who is genuinely crippled wants to be healed. Everyone knows this boy and his condition. Jonas isn't ready for this sort of thing. Usually his touring evangelical show has packed up and moved on by now, but he's still stuck. The boy confronts him with wanting to be healed in the midst of a crowded show. It all comes down to this. The whole community will know Jonas is a fraud and he'll be in deep trouble. Being the con man that he is he knows how to spin a tale. When the

boy confronts him he says, "You ask for one more demonstration of the Lord's kindness. One more show of faith. Well that's what this is about. You gotta have it or you can't get healed. If there are any doubts in your hearts the Lord cannot deliver his healings. If anyone among you has any doubts, like you brother Will [the sheriff]. I know you have doubts. But even you must believe because this boy's chances of walking are within your hands." The boy falters in his attempts to walk and falls. The crowd groans. Jonas is quick to save his neck. He continues as if he knew all along, "Brothers and sisters, I ask you to consider tonight that the fate of a young boy, this innocent, rests in the heart of a cynic." (Points at the sheriff.)

You have to watch the movie to see how it all turns out, but it is certainly playing on the power of belief and the weakness of doubts. In our gospel reading the crowds ask Jesus, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answers, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

What does this belief look like? Is it having no doubts, no cynical thoughts, no questions about God? Could a boy be genuinely healed only if everyone intellectually believed a miraculous healing could occur?

What does this belief look like? After all, doesn't it all come down to that? Since we might consider that eternal life is on the line here, it might seem rather important that we get it right! We're all looking for a miracle - for ourselves, that this life is not all there is but that God has something good beyond death in store for us.

You'll remember that I've said before that I do not equate faith with belief in church doctrines. I could care less about how you understand original sin, atonement theology, the Trinity or a whole host of other church doctrines. That stuff isn't important. What all that stuff is, is our attempts to describe mysteries about God that are beyond our human capacity to grasp. If your Christian faith is a struggle to believe doctrines that don't seem believable then you are going to burn out. What is this belief Jesus is talking about?

This belief is not an intellectual exercise. It is a heart experience. It comes from deep down inside, and it might be hard to describe with words. The prophet Jeremiah talks about a fire burning within him that drove him to action, even though he knew that action would get him into trouble, but he could not quench the fire.

When Martin Luther was on trial for his writings against the church it was demanded that he take back all that he wrote and admit that he was wrong. To do so would save his neck. To not do so was certain to bring about his execution. The wise thing to do would be to take it back, even if it meant lying. But Luther couldn't do that. You may remember his famous statement, "Here I stand for I can do no other."

Luther wasn't being belligerent. He wasn't being mean. To take back his writings would be to go against what his soul was telling him. The only way to be true to himself, the only way he'd be able to live with himself, was to stand up for what his heart told him. He didn't care about the consequences. Better to be executed with his sense of self intact than to live forever having sinned against his own self.

Are there things you just won't do? It doesn't matter whether others think they are legal or ethical, they are just things you wouldn't consider. To do them would cause you grief beyond compare. You'd stay up at night in disbelief at what you had just done. This is the kind of thing that is getting at your core ethics. This is the place where this belief Jesus is talking about dwells.

It is not intellectual. It is not something you have to force. It is just there. It is a driving force that moves you. You have to respond to its prompting.

The crowds that day that were talking to Jesus wanted more intellectual proof. Even though this is the same crowd that experienced the miraculous feeding that we talked about last week, they want more. That's the problem with intellectual belief only. It is something that always wants more proof, more verification. Deeply held beliefs that have become a part of your self don't require this sort of thing.

The real problem is how do you develop this level of belief? How do you develop it in yourself and how do you develop it in others? Many parents of adult children express worry about the apparent lack of faith in their children.

Here's what you don't do. I was at a Redwings game last week and there was a guy at the ticket booths with a megaphone preaching. His intentions were probably good. He spoke of God's love and the sacrifice of Jesus for our salvation. He was saying all sorts of things that I agree with intellectually, but he infuriated me. I just wanted to get away from him - and I'm supposed to like that sort of thing because I'm a pastor! It all just felt like a distortion of the gospel. Megaphones and preaching won't get you anywhere.

The Bible tells us that faith at the deep level we've talked about only comes as the work of God. That may make us very uncomfortable. Something so important should be in our hands, but in truth, it is not. And ultimately that is good, for anything that you can create by your own ability is also able to fail. Not so with God.

So, it is not ultimately within our power to create this belief Jesus is talking about within ourselves or within others. But do we throw up our hands and say we are helpless. Certainly not!

Hear the words of St. Paul to the Philippians. They are what we should do and how we should live. "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

Said differently, don't be afraid of the voice of faith God has put in you. Let it speak. And others will notice. You will be a far better witness than any calculated words you could say. From there we leave it up to God.