

I Don't Believe What I Just Saw

Sports was a big part of my life growing up – whether that was playing, watching my older brother play, or watching our favorite teams on TV. I have fond memories of listening to the TV commentators as I grew up watching Jim McKay and Wide World of Sports, Tim McCarver and the New York Mets, and Verne Lundquist and The Masters. One thing that fascinated me was their ability to think on their feet. To describe a moment in time using words. Words that would sometimes become immortal. Who here remembers the introduction to the Wide World of Sports? “The thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat”? Or Al Michaels at the 1984 Winter Olympics, “Do you believe in miracles... yes!”? Or when in the first game of the 1988 World Series, Jack Buck, the legendary Los Angeles Dodgers television broadcaster called the game where Kirk Gibson, though hurt with two bad legs, stepped up to the plate and hit a pinch-hit home run in the bottom of the 9th with two outs to win the game. His call on that day and the title of my sermon today: “I don't believe what I just saw”.

I played Little League baseball like my brother before me, and while he was always a better athlete, back then I did not care. I just wanted to play. As we got older, and the kids got bigger, and the game got faster, one kid in particular stood out on my brother's team. His name was William Glenn Junior, but he went by Billy. Billy was a quiet kid, with quiet confidence and a shy smile... in the body of an NFL player by the time he was 13 years old. Billy eventually wound up at Florida State University, a 6 foot 5 inch, 245 pound tight end, but what I remember of him is how he was treated during the annual father-son baseball game. You see, the years that Billy played with my brother, the fathers and coaches would have the younger brothers stand on the hill on opposite side of the fence whenever Billy came to bat. And he would still hit the ball past us. It was a sight to behold.

Billy also had a younger brother, named Lamarr. Lamarr was not as tall as his brother but was just as impressive as an athlete. Lamarr also wound up at Florida State University, a 6 foot 1 inch, 235 pound running back that was drafted 195th overall in the 1999 NFL Draft by our very own Tampa Bay Buccaneers. During my first two years in tee-ball, Lamarr and I were on the same team before getting split up on separate teams as we got older. I was not a great baseball player, but I had a decent arm and from time to time I would be called on to pitch. I don't know if it's nostalgia, or the innocence of youth, but I remember those times fondly. If I close my eyes and try hard enough, I can hear the parents cheering in the bleachers. I can still smell the dirt and grass. I can smell the hot dogs, the popcorn, and the bubble gum too.

One day I was called on to pitch in a game against the team that Lamarr played for. I can't recall how I was playing, or how many pitches it took, but I can tell you one thing about facing Lamarr during his at bat... the sound that the bat made hitting the ball I threw still rings in my ears today. It is the stuff of nightmares.

Today when I look back and think of Lamarr and that moment, I am reminded of Jack Buck... “I don't believe what I just saw”. I can still remember what it felt like. Both my disappointment and the awe of watching an incredible athlete do something amazing. In my message today I want to talk to you about belief. About faith, and about my struggle with the relationship I had with the church I grew up in.

To get started, let's consider the question: What makes you have faith? Was it the sight of a miracle? Is it some calming presence that you feel? Is it something you simply cannot describe? I have seen many amazing things in my life – amazing athletes like the Glens seemingly winning games by their sheer will – just like many of us have watched our favorite teams perform astounding feats. And yes, maybe even some of us calling our team winning, a miracle. So here's a question for you all today: is belief in the improbable of my favorite teams the same as belief in God?

Today, when we talk about belief, we talk about the acceptance of truth. Belief is easy – or so one would have thought before the internet age. However, when we talk about faith, it's different. Faith is harder. Faith involves trust. Faith involves a relationship; it involves reliance on someone or something else. Throughout the English translation of scripture there is no difference between faith and belief. The difference is not in the words, but in the action involved in those words. Faith requires wholehearted commitment – and that's hard for me. Maybe it's hard for some of you too.

As the saying goes, seeing is believing. Yet in the readings today we hear from John who talks about people in Jesus's time. People who saw Jesus, people who heard Him speak. Maybe people who saw his miracles too. And yet, they did not believe. In today's readings we heard: "He has blinded their eyes, and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts." Maybe this is my struggle. Maybe this is one of yours as well. Because like John also says in this chapter, "they would not openly acknowledge their faith, for fear they would be put out ... for they loved human praise more than praise from God." Now here's something we can all relate to today. In the digital age of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok – I feel like we all are yearning for human praise. We seek out anonymous "likes". And sometimes we fear to speak about our faith. We fear to tell our story. We fear to question. And we fear to right wrongs that we see happening around us.

I grew up in the Catholic faith, and to tell you a little about how embedded my family was with church, my paternal grandfather's name was Joseph. And his wife's name, my grandmother? You guessed it – Mary. As a child I was forced to go to church on Sunday, even though I struggled with my faith. Even though my parents knew I didn't want to go. Even though they understood that I did not feel like the church was doing enough to right the wrongs that had been done by it. It took a long time for me to realize that this wasn't because my parents were mean, or tough on me, or trying to make me a rule follower, but because in the Catholic faith, attendance is mandatory. Your path to Heaven is through your church, which means if you're not there, you have no path available to you. The relationship is between you and your church and your priest. Not you and God.

I recall one instance at church when we were asked to approach the altar and tell the priest what we were struggling with. What we needed prayers for. My comment then, as it is often to this day, was "faith". I struggle with my faith, and to some extent I am sure I will continue to struggle for the rest of my life. Faith, for me, is not something I have been able to just will into existence. For years I wondered – what will I see that makes me have faith that God exists? I always thought it would be so much easier to see and then believe, than it is to just

believe. And yet, as John wrote, there is fear. There is the love of human praise. There is a disconnect between what we seek as humans, and what Jesus stood for.

I wonder what it must have been like for Jesus's disciples, friends, and family to see the miracles. I wonder what it must have been like to see him heal the sick, to feed the hungry. If I have lived at that time would my faith be stronger? Or would I have continued to be skeptical? Each week we hear the word of God and no matter how many times I hear some of the passages I continue to look for answers. I continue to look for faith. Would seeing Him have been enough to make me have faith?

In a Catholic mass, there comes a part of every service when the priest commands (and forgive me for not singing – not sure anyone wants to hear that this morning!): “Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith.” And as a church, the reply is: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. And Christ will come again.” There's an interesting word in there: mystery. I had not really thought about this too much until a few weeks ago when Renee, Stella, and I attended an Anglican service while we were on vacation in London (thanks Harriet!). The mystery of faith was proclaimed in that service and got me thinking about what that meant for my message today. My faith is a mystery. Yes, even to me. I don't know why I believe. On some days I will tell you that I don't even know what I believe, but I know that God understands. I know that God believes in me. That God believes in us all, and has faith in us all.

After graduating from High School and heading off to college, I rarely went to church. Whenever I was home, my parents still made me go to church. And so for a long time, I didn't go back home that often either. I spent the greater part of 20 years a lapse Catholic. I read books on Christ, on Buddha, on Judaism, on Hinduism, and other works that people recommended to try to kindle a spark of faith. But there was no tinder for that spark to land on.

Along the way Lamarr Glenn and I became friends on Facebook. A little over 10 years ago he posted an article written in the Daytona Beach News Journal about the death of his father, William Senior. On that day, and for the second time in my life, Lamarr provided a moment to me that he will likely never understand the impact of. Because as I read, I could not believe what I had just seen.

In the article it mentioned his children and their accomplishments, and the family he had left behind, but it also mentioned something I couldn't believe I did not know. You see, William was the first Black football player at Seabreeze High School in Daytona Beach, Florida and faced hate, racism, and violence because of the color of his skin. Because he wanted to be part of the team. And it was at that moment that I realized I had no idea how hard his life must have been. I could not comprehend the physical and emotional trauma that he endured. The toll that trauma had on him. The toll his body took for holding that all inside him. I could not comprehend how hard his children's lives must have been. How hard their lives are today without their father. This is not ancient history after all, William faced this battle in 1969... just 50 years ago. I don't know if I would have done anything differently, or said anything differently, or tried to be closer to the Glenn family had I known as a kid, but I do know that those words on the page and my lack of understanding of his path, made me question a lot of things about where I was as a person.

About who I was spending time with, who I was fighting for, and if I was doing enough to be a part of an inclusive community. I was still lost. Still looking for something to believe in.

And then one day all of that changed – the day that Renee brought me to Hodges Presbyterian Church. The church that she had started attending in Jacksonville, Florida years before we met. I'd like to tell you that on that day something miraculous happened. That I saw the light of God in a dream. Or that I saw His hand in the art of Vatican City that we had traveled to around that same time. None of that happened... What I did find was PCUSA. A church that stood for justice, love, and acceptance. That stood for things that I believed in. And what I also found, of all things, was another lapse Catholic, Dr. David Pierce.

David was the pastor at the church and, like me, struggled with the Catholic traditions. He struggled with the reasons for believing. And yet he was in front of the congregation each week providing interpretation of the Word, providing kind words of encouragement to Nicholas, and guiding us all in our faith journeys. It took some time, but eventually I joined the church. It was there that I found a community. A community of faith. It was a place where I was welcome to ask questions. Where I was welcome to struggle. Where I was welcome to participate in the process. And where the relationship that mattered was the one I had with God. And the one I had with His people.

What mattered was how we supported one another. Loved one another. For Jesus does not call us to judge one another, he does not call us to approve of one another's choices, he does not call on us to understand one another, and He certainly does not call on us to determine what people do with their own bodies. Jesus himself did not judge – he accepted people where they were at, for who they were, for what they had done before. Before did not matter to Jesus – what happens next does. For, and I quote, "if anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world." John Chapter 12, verse 47.

As I was considering my message today I wondered... was it the miracles that led people of Jesus's time to believe? Or was it the message? Was it the time spent with the sick, the oppressed, the criminals, or worse yet – the tax collectors? Surely word of the miracles spread, but in the life of the lowly, how much more impactful was time spent directly with Jesus the man? He didn't cure everyone. He didn't feed everyone. Yet the legacy of Jesus's works lives on. His compassion lives on. We are not worthy of His compassion. We are not worthy of his kindness. Yet He gives it to us anyway. All He asks for is for us to do the same to each other. To be kind to one another. To have faith in each other, to have faith that there is good in this world, and to have faith that God is there for us. To treat one another with love and acceptance.

In June of this year, Governor J. B. Pritzker of Illinois gave a graduation speech at Northwestern University. In his remarks he said:

"When we see someone who doesn't look like us, or sound like us, or act like us, or love like us, or live like us, the first thought that crosses almost everyone's brain is rooted in either fear or judgement or both. ... Empathy and compassion are evolved states of being. They require the mental capacity to step past our most primal urges. ... Somewhere along the way in

the last few years our society has come to believe that weaponized cruelty is part of some well thought out master plan. ... Empathy and kindness are considered weak. Many important people look at the vulnerable only as rungs on a ladder to the top. ... And so their thinking and problem solving will lack the imagination and creativity that the kindest people have in spades.” So, like Jesus before us, let us use our kindness as a beacon. Let us be examples, in action, for our community. Let us think creatively about the problems we face and imagine the possibilities. Let us have faith in each other and work together to achieve our vision.

I don’t think it’s because of His words, or His works, that we have faith. As Stacey spoke about last week – it’s the love that God had for us. It’s the love He asks for us to have for one another. I don’t need a miracle to see God’s presence in our lives. I see it in the community we are trying to build. I see it in the care that the people of this church provide for one another.

If you would have told me in 2021 when I agreed to become an elder I would be standing before you today, I would not have believed it. I would not have believed that the people, processes, and yes even the building of this faith community are in the state that they are in. I would not have believed that we had our pastor resign and we are faced with a challenging multi-year journey to find a replacement. And yet I believe in our congregation. I have faith. Yes, here at Hyde Park Presbyterian Church, I have faith that we will prevail against the challenges ahead. I believe, and you should too.

Let us pray.

Loving father, thank you for your grace that we do not deserve. The grace that offers the gift of salvation that we could never earn on our own. Help us to lead lives full of forgiveness and mercy. Help us to believe in You. In your son’s name, Amen.

Now please stand and sing our final song, found in your worship hymnals, hymn 276, Great is Thy Faithfulness.