

The scene is the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. The 8-man shells were nearing the end of the race for gold.

"It was neck and neck now. The three boats stormed toward the finish line, the lead going back and forth. Moch [the U.S. coxswain] pounded on the ironwood as hard and as fast as he could, the snap-snap-snap of it firing almost like a machine gun in the stern of the boat. Hume took the beat higher and higher until the boys hit forty-four. They had never rowed this high before--never even conceived of it as possible. They edged narrowly ahead, but the Italians began to close again. The Germans were right beside them. 'Deutschland! Deutsch-land! Deutsch-land!' thundered in the boys ears. Bobby Moch sat astride the stern, hunched forward, pounding the wood, screaming words no one could hear. The boys took one last mighty stroke and hurled the boat across the line. In the span of a single second, the German, Italian, and American boats all crossed the line."

Some of you undoubtedly recognize this writing from the 2013 book "The Boys in the Boat." Daniel James Brown explores the evolution of what has been called the best eight-man shell rowing team ever. In particular, he explores it from the perspective of Joe Rantz. Joe's mother died when he was young. This was just the first of a series of abandonments in his young life that made it virtually impossible for him to trust, to have faith in anyone but himself. But he was drawn to row crew at the University of Washington. Crew team members received a great perk. They were guaranteed employment at the university to help defray the cost of college. This was the depression; without a job, Joe could not attend college. Over time, crew came to be life saving for him. For a crew team to function at the highest level, each individual has to be a superb athlete. Equally important, though, is that the team must be able to function flawlessly as one unit, to have complete faith in all the other individuals in the boat. To trust that each of them would perform flawlessly and give more than they dreamed possible.

Faith. The meanings of faith and belief have been intertwined and have evolved through history.

In late October of 1517, 500 years ago, Martin Luther circulated his 95 Treatises, and launched the Protestant Reformation. My colleague at Faith Lutheran, Ben Collahan, recently told me that all of those 95 treatises related to

indulgences, the practice of the Catholic Church of selling eternal salvation for money. But, perhaps more importantly, the Protestant Reformation was also about the primacy of the Bible as "the supreme guide on questions of faith."<sup>i</sup>

The English word "faith" first appears in the scriptures in King James version of the Bible, published in 1611. Jesus exhorts his disciples to have faith.

What did he mean? Modern Bible literalists take this to mean that Jesus expected his followers to believe, to accept as true, that he was God incarnate on Earth. I expect there are some in this room who understand that this is what the New Testament is saying, and therefore reject it.

Many Biblical scholars take a different view. In her 2009 book "The Case for God," Karen Armstrong traces the evolution of the words faith and belief. You may remember that the New Testament was originally written in Greek. In the original, where English Bibles now say "faith," the word used was *pistis*, which means variously trust, loyalty, engagement or commitment.<sup>ii</sup> Jesus was asking for commitment by his disciples. Says Armstrong, Jesus "wanted disciples who would engage with his mission, give all they had to the poor, feed the hungry, refuse to be hampered by family ties, abandon their pride, lay aside their self-importance and sense of entitlement...and trust in the God who was their father. Such faith could move mountains and unleash unsuspected human potential," as in this passage from Matthew.<sup>iii</sup> The passage speaks about healing someone who had mental illness and the moving of a mountain.

Chapter 8: <sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" (meaning the demon.) <sup>20</sup> He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a <sup>[f]</sup> mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

In the fourth century St. Jerome (c. 342-420) translated the New Testament into Latin. The Greek *pistis* became the Latin *fides*, meaning loyalty. In Latin there is no verb tense of *fides*; St. Jerome used *credo* as the verb. To St. Jerome *credo* meant "I give my heart" meaning loyalty.

The editors of the King James Bible, however, translated *credo* as "I believe." But belief had a different meaning then. Are you seeing a trend? Says Armstrong: "In Middle English, *bileven* meant "to prize; to value; to hold dear. So 'belief' originally meant 'loyalty to a person to whom one is bound in promise or duty."<sup>iv</sup> This sense of belief is still in usage, as when a parent "believes" in their child. However, in science and in religion, belief has evolved a very different meaning.

The change started first in scientific usage in the late 17th century. According to Armstrong, "the word 'belief' started to be used to describe an intellectual assent to a hypothetical--and often dubious--proposition."<sup>v</sup> Repeat. This definition was slower to catch on in a religious context, but by mid-19th century, "belief" meaning intellectual assent, had become the common definition in religious language.<sup>vi</sup> "You've got to believe!" says the evangelical preacher. Not stated by the Bible literalists, but equally true, "You've got to check your reason at the door."

We've seen that this was not what was meant in the original Greek, nor in Latin, nor in the first English translation of the Bible.

Jesus said that loyalty, trust and commitment could move mountains. In a word, faith.

What about that crew race we started with? The University of Washington had, for reasons never explained by Hitler's Olympic committee, received the worst lane assignment for the gold medal heat. This, despite them having the best qualifying time. The lane was not a big deal on a windless day on the Langer See in Berlin, but on the day of the gold medal race a gusty crosswind raised whitecaps. UW's outside lane left them fully exposed. Their coach estimated that they had a handicap of at least two boat lengths right off the start. Yet the faith of those eight rowers in each other and in their coxswain allowed them to row flawlessly at the inconceivable cadence of forty-four. Have you ever been on a rowing machine? I have. I feel I'm doing really well when I achieve a cadence of 27. The faith of the University of Washington team moved a mountain and won gold.

Our faith calls us to move mountains. The need is great, both in our internal community and in the wider world. We do this through trust, through loyalty, through engagement and through commitment.

May it be so.

Next week we'll look at how our American Unitarian and Universalist forebears evolved away from the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*, the primacy of scripture. We will look at how their thinking about faith and belief evolved and intersected with reason. Don't touch that dial.

Amen and Blessed Be

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<sup>i</sup> Jeffrey Macdonald and Melanie Stetson Freeman. Luther's Legacy. The Christian Science Monitor, October 30, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Karen Armstrong, The Case for God. Alfred A. Knopf, NY, 2009. P.87.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid. 88