

Redefining and Refusing

As it is in all matters of life, so it is in matters of faith. Unless you call something by its right name, you'll never really understand it. You'll never get to the truth. You'll just wind up with a counterfeit, or worse yet, something that's not even close to the original. Just think about how our culture has *re-defined and re-named* so many things in our lives; e.g., marriage, biological sex/gender, legal/illegal, right/wrong, good/evil. Abortion—aka the murder of an unborn child—has been redefined as “choice and women’s reproductive health.” How many “good Christians” are anti-abortion but okay with assisted suicide for the elderly or the infirm because “their quality of life is diminished”? If you ask them, they define themselves as “pro-life,” and yet... they’re clearly not. Even “Lutheran” has come to be re-defined. *Not all Lutherans are Lutheran, are they?* They may call themselves “Lutheran,” but their beliefs and practices are *anything but Lutheran*. Oftentimes, those beliefs and practices aren’t even Christian; they’re not in harmony with Holy Scripture; e.g., women pastors, open communion, etc. *I could go on, but do I really need to?* You get the point. Unless you call something by its true and right name, you’ll never really understand it for what it really is; you’ll never really get to the heart of the issue.

With all this mind, consider the words of Jesus to Thomas. “*Do not disbelieve, but believe.*” That’s pretty cut-and-dry, don’t you think? In fact, it’s even clearer in the original Greek, where we hear Jesus tell Thomas, “*Do not be unbelieving – apistōn.*” *Pistōn* means “trust, belief, faith,” and the “a” prefix means “no” or “anti.” Our English language functions this same way; e.g., a-symmetrical means it’s not symmetrical, a-typical means it’s not typical; an “a-theist” believes that there is no god. “*Do not be unbelieving/not believing, rather believe.*” I want you to think about that. Jesus doesn’t sugar-coat it. He doesn’t water it down or round off the sharp edges. He calls the unbelieving spade exactly what it is: an unbelieving spade.

But... there’s the issue. Jesus just called this *unbelief*. I know we can all pile on Thomas for doubting the Good News of the resurrection (and we often do). Let’s face it: This is how he’ll forever be known. Not St. Thomas. Not apostle Thomas. Not faithful missionary and holy martyr Thomas. Nope. “Doubting Thomas.” But still... to say that he was “unbelieving Thomas” seems a bit rough, doesn’t it? It’s so judgmental and harsh. Perhaps this is why we soften up the English translation to say, “stop disbelieving.” It doesn’t sound as harsh and judgmental. It’s not as scary.

And I say this for good reason. Deep-down we all have a bit of soft-spot for Thomas. After all, we can relate. We understand. He just wanted to experience what everybody else got to experience. It’s not fair! And if we’re going to define Thomas’ resistance to believe and insistence for proof as “unbelief,” *then what*

does that mean for us? We'd have to say the same exact thing about ourselves. Maybe we should.

Just consider your life in light of the Ten Commandments. Just think about what God has to say about adultery or murder. *"If you even look at a woman with lust in your heart, you've committed adultery. If you even call your brother a fool, you've committed murder."* *"B-b-b-but... I'm not touching, so it's not technically adultery! I'm just saying what everyone else is thinking. Besides, that person hurt my feelings, so it's okay in this case."* ***If God calls it a sin, then shouldn't we do the same?*** (That's what it means to *homologeo*—confess—to say the same thing.) But we don't. We re-define. We rationalize. We make excuses. Just think how "Divine Service" has been re-defined and re-understood among Lutherans, particularly over these past several months. Does the threat of sickness somehow make it okay to now doubt our Lord's Word and Promise that as often as we do this [*Holy Communion*] it ***IS*** His very body and blood for the forgiveness of sin? What if Jesus Himself stood before you and said, *"Stop being afraid. It's Me. I'm right here. Stop unbelieving, and instead believe"*? Would that change things? ***If so, why?*** Hasn't He ***already*** said this ***IS*** His body and blood? So what's the issue? Do you ***need*** to see the angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven before you'll come to the table? Do you need to see Jesus Himself standing here before you'll come (as He bids) and commune? (And this goes for ***all*** matters pertaining to the Third Commandment and our assembling with one another around Christ in worship. This isn't just a COVID thing!) *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."*

Of course, maybe it's not so much an issue of re-***defining*** our unbelief that gets us in trouble as much as it is the ***simple, unvarnished fact that we don't see a problem with our unbelieving.*** We don't have to soften it up or re-define it. We'll be very bold and stand defiantly proud in our unbelief... just like Thomas. *"Unless fill in the blank happens, I will NEVER believe!"* How right you are! You ***will*** never believe! You refuse to believe! That's not a God problem. That's not a doctrinal problem. ***That's a you problem.*** God's not a bully. He's not going to make you believe, so if you refuse to believe something *unless* it meets all your requirements and criteria, ***that unbelief is all on you. You own it! It's yours.***

Martin Luther was once asked what man contributes to his salvation. His reply? "Sin and resistance." That's pretty cut-and-dry, isn't it? In fact, it's so simple; so cut-and-dry and no-nonsense that many a Christian rejects it. *"No, no, no...this can't be! Look at all that I do for God. Surely this must count for something!"* The Truth hurts, which is why so many ***reject*** that Truth. Such Truth attacks and eviscerates our Old Adam selfish desires to want to be like God and be in control and call the shots and have our say. This is a First Commandment issue. You've made yourself god. *"Unless I do this, that, or the other thing, I will never submit; I will never believe."* You're right, and that's the whole problem! We contribute nothing; at least nothing of any good to our salvation. We only bring to

the table our sin and our resistance. We bring our dirty soiled rags and our conditional faith, which is nothing more than unbelief when you get down to it.

But here's the thing: Your Lord knows you better than you know you. He knows how you and Thomas could easily be mistaken for one another in your daily life of faith. This is precisely why your Lord has mercy on you and forgives you. This is precisely why your God and Lord died for you. He had to! That's how great and deadly our sin is! Jesus did it all for us precisely because we have nothing to offer in terms of our own salvation. It's strange to think about, but Jesus died for your sins of conditional faith and arrogant unbelief, and you are to believe this so that you may have life in His name. He humbled Himself to the point of death on the cross for your sinful control issues and power struggles. He died and rose again as proof that He loves you and forgives you.

And the greatest thing of all? He continues to hold out this amazing proof of Divine love to you this very day as He kneels down from heaven to serve you with the gift of Divine peace that is Himself. Look right here [*altar*]/ He tells you exactly what's going on here. **He defines it Himself.** It's quite ironic when you think about it. Here is your Lord of Life, physically breaking into your time and space, putting to death the foolish conditional nature of your weak little faith. *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe..., but you're absolutely right! You will never believe unless you see, touch, taste, and hear, which is precisely why I'm here. Now take and eat. Take and drink. This IS My body and My blood. My peace be with you."* Don't try to redefine it. Flee to it! Give thanks for it! Rejoice in it! Rejoice in Him.

Folks: I can't make it any easier or clearer than what it is (although it will only be understood through the God-given gift of humble and repentant faith, which the Holy Spirit works in and through the means of grace we call Word and Sacrament). **Here is Christ Jesus...for you.** Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Behold, the Lamb of God, who is present and active, even in the midst of this shadowy valley of death and fear. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away all your sin, and who gives to you His absolutely free and unmerited gifts of forgiveness, everlasting life, and eternal salvation. Here is your peace that surpasses all human understanding, and your Lord is holding it out to you today ***no different*** than when He first held it out to Thomas. In fact, He holds it out to you today no different than Thomas because ***His love for you is no different than for Thomas or anyone else in the world for that matter.*** God so loved the world—the WHOLE world—that He gave His only-begotten Son to die for it. Here is that Son, risen and victorious and wanting nothing more than to feed and nourish you with His very present eye-opening, ear-opening, tomb-rending, faith-producing gifts of grace, mercy, and peace.

May this same living and active peace of your very living and active Immanuel Christ Jesus be and remain with you now and always. **AMEN**