

## FAITH – IS IT JUST BELIEF?

December 6<sup>th</sup> is one of the hardest times of the year for me. This year – the 29<sup>th</sup>



anniversary of the murder of 14 women at the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal – we held a Come and Go Vigil to remember those women, to become more aware of issues of violence against women and to contemplate how best to act. Each year the Women’s House provides me with a list of the women and children who have been murdered by their intimate partners

or their known acquaintances in the past 12 months in Ontario. This year there were pictures and brief biographies of 47 people.

It is always the hardest and most emotionally costly work I take on in my ministry. When I prepare the slides for the PowerPoint slide show that runs continuously during the two-hour vigil, I try to hold each image, each person’s story, each tragedy in my heart. I find tears course down my cheeks as I try to honour their lives by preparing for this community vigil. Prayers arise from deep within my soul, asking, “How is this just? Why do you let this happen? Why to men like me feel so threatened that they lash out with violence? When will it ever stop?”



At first, silence.

Then frustration, anger, helplessness, despair, surrender.

It forces me to look more deeply within myself. What are the ways that I, too, have contributed to such toxicity for the women I encounter each day? In what ways do I need to deepen my self-awareness so that I do not continue to be part of the problem? How does my belief in God sustain my journey toward becoming ever more faithful to the Way of the risen Christ? Is faith enough?



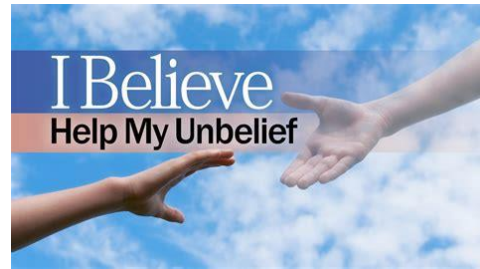
**Women’s House**  
Serving Bruce & Grey

Often, I can take solace in the words of A New Creed<sup>1</sup> – a way of proclaiming my faith that gives me enough room in which to grow into the person the Spirit nurtures me to become. “We are not alone,” is the existential beginning of that creed. In those words, we affirm that God is always with us, but we are also there for one another.

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<sup>1</sup> A New Creed can be found in our hymn book *Voices United* on page 918.

When confronted by the tragedy of violence against women as I was on Thursday night, the words, “We are called to be the Church, ...to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil,” add weight to my questions. Just saying or reading the words, however, isn’t enough whether I believe them with all my heart or not.



Belief is never enough.

I know this seems like an odd thing for me to say. After all, I’m a minister in the United Church of Canada and part of my call is to proclaim the good news. Is not *belief* the good news? The good news, the faith I try to proclaim, “is *not* to be thought of as giving one’s assent to a number of propositions or ideas or doctrines.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, I return to the words of A New Creed: “To love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil.” I attempt – and often fail – to follow these words of belief so that I can be part of not only transforming myself but part of transforming the society in which we all live. I embrace this life-long calling as a Christian not because of belief, but because I love the One I follow: Jesus the Christ. In other words, I be-*love*.



In my be-loving, I no longer intellectualize some sort of artificial construct that quantifies and contains the divine. Instead, I enter into a relationship with the divine revealed in the person of Jesus and empowered by the Spirit. As I deepen that relationship, fostered by my own encounters with others I love and serve, nourished by my times of meditation and of contemplative prayer, I discover a relationship best described as “I-Thou.”<sup>3</sup> Instead of passively endorsing particular doctrines, I open myself – the “I” – to an encounter initiated by the divine – “the Thou.”

Because of the revelation of God’s self-giving, sacrificial and vulnerable love in the Advent of the baby Jesus, I encounter the path I like to call the Way of Jesus. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus was all about transformative relationships. When confronted by those seeking healing of mind, body and spirit, he engaged in a relationship which brought about wholeness and healing. When challenged by brokenness in the world – the despised and fraudulent tax collector Zacchaeus or the woman at



<sup>2</sup> Douglas John Hall. “Why Christian? for those on the edge of faith.” (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1998), p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Buber; (February 8, 1878 – June 13, 1965) was an Austrian-born Israeli Jewish philosopher best known for his philosophy of dialogue, a form of existentialism centered on the distinction between the I-Thou relationship and the I-It relationship. Born in Vienna, Buber came from a family of observant Jews, but broke with Jewish custom to pursue secular studies in philosophy.

Jacob's Well working on her sixth partner – he established the vulnerability and the intimacy of relationship, building trust while being fully present, relationships that led to transformation in how they lived in the world. In the cultivating of those encounters, Jesus, too, was transformed.

My faith, then, becomes a journey of relational transformation. My tears when creating the PowerPoint slide show showed my be-loving of the One who would be similarly horrified. My presence at the vigil was one of my responses to that relationship of faith in an effort to be part of the change I feel called to make within myself and within our society. As a flawed and vulnerable person, constantly being challenged to grow ever more deeply into relationship with the divine I be-love, I am transformed so that I can “seek justice and resist evil.” With every faltering step and with each tentative change, we enter into relationship with one another. These many I-Thou encounters reflect the I-Thou loving God initiates with us and into which we grow.

I was chatting with Liz Dillman that night as she served as lift operator and as welcoming greeter. She told me that a young couple arrived near the beginning of the evening, mounting the stairs to enter the worship space for the vigil. A brief five minutes later they emerged and came back down the stairs. The young woman was crying freely. At the bottom of the stairs, still crying, the woman gave Liz a fervent hug and said, “Thank you so much for having this.” Then they quickly left. Liz was powerfully touched and said to me, “If this is all that happens tonight, it was worth it.”



I agree with Liz because “loving and serving others” while “seeking justice and resisting evil” proclaims the good news. That simple but profound hug demonstrated the power of relationship modelled on our own be-loving. Faith in action such as this transforms the world.