

FAITH



MATTERS

Faith Matters & Belief Matters

BY THE REV. CHRISTINE LESLIE

I have often heard it said that if we want to change the world, we need to change our minds. I agree; what we believe does seem to determine how we behave. And how we behave determines, to a great extent, the quality of our lives. This is why what we teach our children is so important.

health & wellbeing

It's also why we adults need to take the time and energy, on a regular basis, to examine what we believe and why. A "belief" is defined as something we accept as true. Since unexamined beliefs, and consequently unexamined behaviors, can cause much unhappiness and distress, taking a "fearless and moral inventory" of our beliefs can be painful but worthwhile. Doing so affords us insight into why we behave the way we do and allows us change what we believe — and how we behave — for the better.

Examining our beliefs takes courage and willingness to change behaviors that do not serve us well. Most people laugh knowingly when I remind them that yes, the truth will set you free, but first it makes you miserable. With insight in hand, we can change what we believe and, consequently, how we behave. The human maturation process is, in fact, growth in our ability to do this self-examination and self-changing on an ongoing basis.

What interests me about all of this is that the more we are willing to do this individually, the more we are able to do it collectively. There is strength in numbers, as is detailed in a book entitled *The 100th Monkey*.

In it, the author tells a true story of monkeys on South Pacific islands who washed their food in fresh streams fed by mountain snows. When a drought left them with no way to wash food, they began to sicken and die from eating it unwashed. Eventually, some began washing it in the ocean surrounding their island homes — something that had never occurred to them before the streams dried up.

Then an amazing thing happened. When the 100th monkey washed her food in the ocean, all of the monkeys on all of the islands suddenly knew they, too, could wash their food in the ocean. A small minority's risk of a new belief and a new behavior stemmed the tide of sickness and death and made the salvation of all these monkeys possible.

The optimist in me thinks it is just a matter of time until humans experience similarly miraculous events with regards to a number of beliefs and behaviors. For example, I look forward to the day when the "100th monkey" phenomenon kicks into gear against homophobia, so it will no longer be a belief that sickens and kills straight and GLBT people alike. This will happen when a majority no longer thinks that homophobia is a belief worthy of devotion. This, in turn, will make it possible for a majority to give up practicing homophobic behavior towards ourselves or other people. Without the belief, the behavior will be thought unacceptable, if not downright bizarre.

During the late 20th century, this has slowly but surely become the case for racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, classism, nationalism, ageism, and the like. Anything that would have us believe and behave as if a group is inferior because of its identity or faith is belief that does not serve us well.

The dictionary defines "faith" as "unquestioning belief" and cites it as a synonym for "belief."

Consequently, in the minds of many people, faith is something we are supposed to have unquestioningly, to believe without deciding for ourselves whether we think it to be true. This does not serve us well, either. An unexamined, dogmatic faith, one we accept as truth without question, can be the source of dangerous behaviors. Homophobia has one of its greatest friends in unexamined faith. Faith matters and belief matters all the more when we understand this.

One of the reasons I enjoy being alive at this point in history is because many people are examining their faith and beliefs to ferret out negative notions fuelling negative behaviors. This means we can look forward to the day when people of good will and good faith will be among those challenging, not cooperating with, homophobia, sexism, racism, nationalism, ageism, classism, anti-Semitism, able-bodiedism, and all the rest.

And who knows; maybe the day will come when we all will just "get it" and our collective belief in the goodness of God and the viability of trust, compassion, mutual respect, love, laughter, justice, and joy will fuel our behaviors. Whether I live to see this day or not matters not to me. What does matter is that I am among the faithful striving to make this day possible. And, like raindrops that keep the oceans full, the faith in my life added to the faith in others' lives, is what makes life worth living. ▼

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