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Fifty years ago, millions of Americans sat by their radios and listened to *This I Believe*. For five minutes each day, they heard from statesmen and secretaries, teachers and cab drivers, all of whom spoke about their most deeply held beliefs. Thankfully, series has been resurrected on NPR's program All Things Considered, and can be heard emanating from the radio on Monday mornings. I love this series of essays totaling over 15,000 in all. I especially loved the one I heard on May 29, 2006. It was submitted by Denver restaurant critic Jason Sheehan and it may strike you as odd that I loved it, knowing as you do, that I have been a vegetarian for more than 15 years, but here it is, at least part of it if you want to read the whole thing you will have to go to the website...

*After listening to the results of this project for several weeks, I knew I could do three minutes, too. Certainly not on world peace or the search for meaning in an increasingly distracted world or anything as grave and serious as all that, but on a belief just as true.*

*I believe in barbecue. As soul food and comfort food and health food, as a cuisine of both solace and celebration. When I'm feeling good, I want barbecue. And when I'm feeling bad, I just want barbecue more. I believe in barbecue in all its regional derivations, in its ethnic translations, in forms that range from white-tablecloth presentations of cunningly sauced costillas, to Chinese take-out spareribs that stain your fingers red, to the most authentic product of the tarpaper rib shacks of the Deep South. I believe that like sunshine and great sex, no day is bad that has barbecue in it.*

*I believe that barbecue drives culture, not the other way around. Some of the first blows struck for equality and civil rights in the Deep South were made not in the courtrooms or schools or on buses, but in the barbecue shacks. There were dining rooms, backyards and roadhouse juke joints in the South that were integrated long before any other public places.*

*I believe that good barbecue needs sides the way good blues need rhythm, and that there is only one rule: Serve whatever you like, but whatever you serve, make it fresh. Have someone's mama in the back doing the "taters" and hush puppies and sweet tea, because Mama will know what she's doing -- or at least know better than some assembly-line worker bagging up powdered mashed potatoes by the ton.*

*I believe that proper barbecue ought to come in significant portions. Skinny people can eat barbecue, and do, but the kitchen should cook for a fat man who hasn't eaten since breakfast. My leftovers should last for days.*

*I believe that if you don't get sauce under your nails when you're eating, you're doing it wrong. I believe that if you don't ruin your shirt, you're not trying hard enough.*

*I believe -- I know -- there is no such thing as too much barbecue. Good, bad or in-between, old-fashioned pit-smoked or high-tech and modern; it doesn't matter. Existing without gimmickry, without the infernal swindles and capering of so much of contemporary cuisine, barbecue is truth; it is history and home, and the only thing I don't believe is that I'll ever get enough.*

It is good to have unwavering believe in something you know to be true. This morning's scripture is about such a belief, not in BBQ, but in God.

Most of us have some familiarity with Job and his story; he is a good man whose life goes from bad to worse, and then to worse again still, before it gets better. The book of Job attempts to offer some insight into the very difficult question, why do bad things happen to good people?

Job is a good man to whom terrible things happen. He is a devoutly faithful man, who loses everything. It is good to have unwavering belief in something we know to be true. Job knows God's love to be true, but what happens to our beliefs when everything we know is shaken? What happens to faith when we, like Job, feel as though we have lost everything? In those moments how many of us can say, with unwavering clarity...this I believe! Perhaps as important as it is to know what we believe, it is equally important to know what we do not believe. That is the lens through which I found my entry point to the scripture this week.

This I do not believe. I do not believe that our lives, our human pain and suffering are the result of a God who sits in judgment. And for amusement, or to balance some cosmic scale of good and evil, makes deals with the devil that damn humanity to inexplicable misery and pain.

I do not believe in the idea of "God's will." Let me explain, to say that God has a will is to make a very human assumption that we understand something about the confine or definability of that will.

Think about it-when do people say, “it was God’s will?” They say it when something has happened that they do not understand or cannot comprehend with mere logic. I have never been able to wrap my mind around the concept of “God’s will”. The mere suggestion of it usually causes me to twitch uncomfortably...understanding that it is often a turn of phrase that brings people comfort...rather than ask them to change what they are saying, I immediately start translating their intention into my own language for God. Sometimes it helps me to replace the idea of “God’s will” with the active verb itself. So, I ask God what is needed in this situation? If it is love, I I ask what is love’s will? If it is kindness or compassion, I ask what is the will of kindness or compassion in this situation? If justice that is called for, I ask God to help me to know the will of justice. In this practice I am still taking the matter to God, only without limiting God’s response to my ability to understand it.

What happened to Job was inexplicable-no one knew why he lost his family, his servants, his property, and then why his entire body was covered with sores. He did not know, his wife did not know, his friends did not know. It is only natural to want, even to need to know so badly that as to assign some logical explanation to the inexplicable-the unperceivable. Here is this man Job, a good man, a God fearing man who’s body becomes consumed with pain- it is human nature to assign a moral value to the story- this happened because of this or that. But did it, or is that just our interpretation of it? Can we really ever hope to fully understand why things happen?

The more I read scripture, the more convinced I become that scripture is less about what God said or did, than it is about what people say and do. It is about how we interpret what happens. God...I am becoming convinced is not to be found in the words themselves as much as the spaces between the words. Look for what is left unsaid, or undone, or unexplained, and there you will find God. If we are to believe in a still speaking God-then we also have to believe that the Bible is not the final word, rather a fare and decent attempt on behalf of humanity to assign words to God. It shouldn't surprise us then when those same words fail to express or explain the totality of the God we love and serve.

This I believe, unshakable faith is grounded not in a God that wills, but a God that is! God is all those things that Jesus is reported to have said about God and more; God does not simply will love, God is love. God does not simply will kindness or compassion; God is kindness and compassion itself. Assuming God can only will Justice to happen, is to attempt to separate God from justice- God is justice. Because God is justice, love, compassion and kindness- it is therefore possible for God to be with us in the face of injustice, with us in the absence of compassion or kindness-where there is no love, God is there advocating for love.

Unshakable faith, is knowing that God is in the in between, in the inexplicable. That is how we know how to respond to something even when we don't have time to look it up in scripture or turn to someone for advice-while that is often helpful, what is more helpful is knowing that whether or not we are prepared to respond-God is always prepared... knowing this does not eliminate unfairness and tragedy from our lives, but it does equip us to deal with it when it happens.

The best example of this I have heard in a long time came from the Amish of Nickel Mines PA, earlier this week. In the wake of the school shooting that shook the nation and threatened the peace of this quiet Lancaster community-when it appeared to us as if they had lost everything-their faith was unshakable. Their response to the loss of five young girls- was to reach out in love. They went in groups to homes of those who had lost family members, they brought food and prayed and started a medical relief fund for the injured. What is especially remarkable about this group of Christian brothers and sisters, is not only that they did these things for each other- but that they also did these things for the family of the man who killed the girls. They did not reject those who, for most of us, would be hard to embrace. Instead of focusing on the death of five individuals they celebrated their lives, and moved on in solidarity with one another. The Amish believe in forgiveness. They live what they believe.

There will be some who will try to explain what happened. Still others who will say it was “God’s will.” For me, it is enough to know that God is with the Amish community in their grief, just as God was with those girls whose lives were inexplicable taken from them. There was no justice in what happened in Nickel Mines PA earlier this week, but the God of justice, love, compassion and kindness is surrounding that community just as that same God is surrounding us this morning, this I believe.

Amen