

**Series: BELONG...BELIEVE...BECOME—January 14, 2007**

**GATHERING EVIDENCE  
Luke 14:25-35**

**I. INTRO**

- A. Has anyone here ever had a serious case of **buyer's remorse**? If you don't know what that is, let me explain with a story. It's a Davis family legend, so you may have heard it before.
1. In the first year Lori and I were married, we realized that we needed an additional vehicle. I was convinced God was calling us to buy a van. So I found a 1969 Ford Econoline. My first mistake was looking at it at night. It looked cool enough—gold shag carpeting over the **entire** interior. My second mistake was that I bought it. My third mistake was that I used Lori's money that she'd saved from being a waitress to buy it!  
-By the time my "lemon" alarm went off—the deal was done. I spent the whole next year feeling stupid—and fixing it up to re-sell and get Lori's money back. And, after a **ton** of work, I **did** sell for pretty much what I paid for it!
  2. Most people are a little smarter than me. Anyone here ever buy a home—sight unseen? Anyone ever marry someone, sight unseen? Like, you believed the description in your mail order catalogue? Most of us have seen enough marriage disasters that we want to **really** know a person before we say, "I pledge my love, my heart, my bed and my stuff for a lifetime!"  
-Of course, we **don't** get to inspect our kids before we have them...
- B. We have made a commitment at The Olive Branch that we will be a safe community, where people who are undecided about Jesus can experience Him and gather the information they need so that they can make a **really solid** decision about following Him.  
-You've probably heard us say, "Don't check your brain at the door!" Anyone know why? Because we want **everyone** to think through and analyze what we say. Real truth isn't threatened by doubts or questions! Bottom line—this decision is **so** important, **so** critical—you'll want to take your time.  
-If you find yourself here as an undecided person or a seeker this morning, I want to be as straight as I can with you: This is a **safe** community, but the message is **dangerous**. Revolutionary. This message will touch every part of your world.  
-What I want to do today is talk about why people in 2007 need time and space to make a good decision about Jesus, and then where belief...faith...needs to take us. Is everyone okay with that?

**II. WHY PEOPLE NEED TIME, SPACE, & ENCOURAGEMENT**

- A. Let me start with a statement that most of you have heard at some point: **It doesn't matter what you believe...as long as you're sincere**. Anyone ever heard that?
1. Let me talk about that statement for a minute—because it dominates a lot of the thinking in our culture. I think those who say it are **sincere**, but I really don't think they **mean** what they're saying:  
\*They couldn't mean that it's okay for a crazed cult leader to sincerely lead his sincere followers to join him in drinking poisoned Kool-Aid and die together...  
\*They surely don't believe that it's okay for white supremacists or anti-Semites to believe and practice their beliefs as long as they're sincere—which, as revolting as it seems, they certainly seem to be.

- \*Or that it's okay for sincere religious people to promote blowing up abortion clinics, or teach their kids to hate whole groups of people they consider to be infidels—and strap explosives to themselves to kill as many as possible.
2. People who say this would **never** agree that their statements should be taken literally. They also couldn't mean that the act of sincerely **believing** something makes it true. For example, if there's one inch of ice on Lake Simcoe, and you **sincerely BELIEVE** it will hold you, your ice-fishing shack and your snowmobile, it **will!**
- It's not the sincerity or quality of your faith that matters; it's the **object** of your faith. Is **that** solid? In his book, **Finding Faith**, Brian MacLaren says that the real problem is **bad** faith. In other words, people can believe things that are **right**, but have **bad** faith. The religious professionals Jesus encountered believed the right things for the most part—and yet when He, God, showed up, they hated him and killed him.
- We live in a world—a culture—where a lot of people have been exposed to **bad** faith—and never to **good** faith or belief. And that's why they reject it or think they don't need it. Let me distinguish between **good** faith and **bad** faith.
- Bad faith is based on unquestioned authority. People don't think for themselves—they're **told** what to believe.
  - Bad faith is based on pressure or coercion. "If you don't believe or conform, we will kick you out." I used to live close to the Amish community in Pennsylvania. I admired the simplicity of their lifestyle. What I didn't admire was how women were treated. They were denied education—and basically seen as baby factories who keep the men happy. Why did they stay? Something called **shunning**. You question things—do things differently—you will be ignored; thrown out of the community.
  - Bad faith is arrogant and unteachable. When a person's faith makes them look down on others, think that they have all the answers, and talk without being willing to listen—it's **bad** faith.
  - Bad faith is dishonest. The people who hold it will typically only accept truth that fits with what they want to believe. And bad faith doesn't typically change people's hearts. It may help people to get rid of bad habits and have a better work ethic—but it doesn't usually change their hearts to make them kinder, more compassionate, loving and accepting. Bad faith is typically proud and rigid and harsh.
3. Bad faith turns people away. People see the caricatures of this in **Church Lady** from SNL or **Ned Flanders**—and think, "I don't want to get **anywhere near** that!" And I would totally agree. But the best alternative to bad faith is not **no faith**. It's good faith. And that's **exactly** what we want to be about. Let me describe **good** faith.
- Good faith is humble, teachable—and inquisitive in a really healthy way. You've heard us say, "No one checks their brain at the door!" And we **mean** that. If all real truth is God's truth, why would I ever have to be afraid of questioning things—or people who question
  - Secondly, good faith is **honest**. Because good faith is humble and teachable and inquisitive, a person with good faith doesn't have to know everything—or be afraid to admit questions and doubts—and where their faith is limited. Honesty means being willing to admit the weaknesses of the faith community you're a part of—confess where people who share your

beliefs have been intolerant or inconsistent. Friends, this is an **incredibly** freeing thing! We don't have to have the end times nailed down. We don't have to have 2000 years of doctrine nailed down. **It's okay! Really!**

- c. Third, good faith includes others—lives in community. Why wouldn't I want a group of trusted traveling companions to help me see my own blind spots and help me in discovering my own faith? Sometimes people get into this "Just Jesus and Me" mode. Following Jesus was **never** intended to be a solitary journey! Good faith includes others—others who differ from you—in the journey.
- d. And good faith is active. It's not having the "right stuff" on the back burner of your life while you go and pursue something else—like money or status or success or a hot date or party-time. Good faith means that you practice—not compartmentalize—what you say you believe. If you say you believe the church is the Hope of the World—but your life, your wallet, and your calendar says something else—that's **bad** faith, not good faith.
- e. Fifth, good faith is tough. Good faith is not about God giving me everything I want and following my "to do" list. Good faith means that God's ways and thoughts **really are** bigger, greater, higher and better than mine. That a God I can control is not worthy of my worship. See, if my faith can't make it through tough, disappointing times—and never inspires me to do better, to deny myself and to resist temptation, what good is it? If what I really believe doesn't **cost** anything, is it **worth** anything?
- f. Finally, good faith is relational. Faith is intended for us to have a warm, but sometimes stormy relationship with God; a God who's totally interested in us going deeper with Him and understanding Him better with each passing year.

-If you're on the front end of finding faith this morning—this may all sound quite strange; maybe irrelevant. But think about it: What would be the harm in just saying something like, "Hello—is anyone out there?"

- B. I guess the bottom line in what I'm saying is that it takes **time** and **evidence** and **good experiences** before people can and will believe in Jesus.
  - This is a tough time to be a Christ-follower. A survey done in the States not long ago asked people to name things that characterized Christians. Know what the number one response was? **They hate gays!** I think, "Wait, that doesn't describe me!"—and yet that is apparently one of the things people see in the media that sticks. Jesus—the One we love and model our lives after said we would be best known by our **love**. Apparently we aren't
  - Our culture in Canada is **very** wary of people who have faith in Jesus. Someone put it like this: "Most people are **fascinated** with Jesus; they just don't like his **wife**." You know, the Bride of Christ. The church. It's basically because the people who've taken his name haven't looked, lived, or loved a whole lot like He did. We have to live that down. Instead of grace and acceptance and sacrificial love, Christians have sometimes been better known for judging and condemning. Meanwhile, the Jesus we love and serve apparently hung around with people who didn't believe right, act right, talk right, or live right.
  - I'm not whining and complaining about this. I'm only saying that we as followers of Jesus have to live this junk down, along with the reputation of every kook who, in Jesus' Name, led people to drink poisoned Koolaid, bombed abortion clinics, and carried a sign that says, "God hates fags."

1. Brian MacLaren in his book, **More Ready Than You Realize** records the emails between him and a spiritual friend—a seeker he calls, Alice. After reading a book he wrote about coming to faith in Jesus, she writes these unforgettable words:
 

***“When I was reading your book today at certain points I felt so good, and at certain points I felt like I was about to cry, because it felt like something was really getting through to me. But I feel like there’s something holding me back. There’s some sort of defense mechanism in me that tells me not to believe any of it...I need to make sure that I’m not getting “lured in”—just to find out once I go ahead and believe that a whole bunch of other stuff comes along with it that I can’t feel comfortable with. And then my whole person will change and I’ll become closed-minded and bigoted and brainwashed and everything bad...I just can’t feel that I can trust it. I don’t know what to do (More Ready...p.32).”***

-It took **two years** of active seeking for her to work through these negative feelings! And that’s a short time compared to some people I’ve walked with. And it took **three years** for some of Jesus’ disciples to believe!
2. Why? Well, think of it in terms of an engagement. Imagine dating, and then being engaged to someone you deeply, deeply love. But, as you get to know them really well, you find out that they have some pretty weird relatives—and that totally wigs you out. And their job has huge implications for you. They have some quirky habits you’re not crazy about. Oh, yeah, and they have a child who doesn’t like you.
 

-What do you **need** if you’re in a situation like that? Well, **lots of together time. Lots of evidence.** See, time—time **with** is the only thing that can help you make sure of a person’s character. That what you see is real, not bait to hook you and reel you in.

-“Alice”, the undecided person I referenced earlier, also wrote this in another email to Brian, her spiritual friend: ***Whatever it is that you and the people of your church have, I’m convinced that it’s beautiful, I’m just not sure I believe it’s true yet.***

-Do you see what she’s saying? “I like what I see—but I’m going to have to watch it, think about it, test it. My soul is the most important, sensitive, vulnerable part of me—and I don’t think it could the disappointment of believing in Jesus that intimately—and then finding out it’s not real.”
3. Here at The Olive Branch we need to help people in the in the evidence-gathering process do what Jesus said to do. **Count the cost.** We actually do this all the time. If you were going to spend \$450,000 on a house, which is quite likely in this area—what would you do? Go ahead—throw out some answers. Check neighbors, schools, layout—probably hire a home inspector:
 

-But the biggest question is...**Can I afford it!?** Can I buy it and not have to eat dog food for 20 years? Will it be a home or a prison?

  - a. What Jesus said about believing makes incredible sense. He never told people, “Don’t worry about whether this makes sense—**just put your brain in neutral and believe!**” No, Jesus told his followers to **count the cost!** One day he said to a bunch of potential followers: “Following me will not be convenient, cheap or easy.” Listen to his words:

And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple. “But don’t begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you. They would say, ‘There’s the person who started that building and couldn’t afford to finish it (Luke 14:27-30 NLT)!’

- b. Remember Alice’s words? *I need to make sure that I’m not getting “lured in”—just to find out once I go ahead and believe that a whole bunch of other stuff comes along with it that I can’t feel comfortable with.*
- Because of stuff they’ve seen and heard, some people who are attracted to Jesus wonder if they have to turn Republican, or agree with the Christian right or believe the earth was created 6000 years ago, give up all their friends...People think, “Can I follow Jesus and still be **me!**”
- c. To be honest, Jesus asked people to repent of their sin and follow Him. What does that mean? The word *repent* literally means to change your mind. To choose a different, better direction that leads you toward God, toward wholeness and toward love—and not **away**. When Jesus challenged people to repent, he was saying, “Will you simply change the direction you’re headed in—and aim for **Me**. Will you see sin, not as something fun I’m asking you to stop doing, but as a disease that will kill you and everything you love and fill your heart with guilt and shame?”
- So, have you ever **done** that?

### III. WHAT ARE THE **BELIEVE** ESSENTIALS?

- A. So, does **what** you believe really matter? It sure does! When I say **believe**, I’m not talking about general truth—like eating too much fat is unhealthy; like we all need aerobic exercise; like overwork and lack of sleep will stress you out and take the fun out of life. Most people **know** that—but not nearly as many **live** it. If believing it doesn’t change the way you live, it **really** doesn’t make much difference, does it?
- People who are exploring faith generally want to know, “**What** are you asking me to believe? And what are you going to ask me to **do**? **I WANT TO KNOW WHAT I’M SIGNING UP FOR!**” And that’s fair, isn’t it? So, I’m just going to try to be as basic as possible. And I want to center it around Jesus—God’s final **Word** to humans.
1. Behind everything is the belief that there is a God, that He’s just as real as you and me, and that He’s not only a **Person**, He’s **personal**. In other words, knowable—able and willing to speak, listen, and interact with humans.
- That even though there are a **lot** of mysterious, unknown and unknowable things about Him, He is good and loving and kind; that if you look carefully behind everything that is beautiful and pure and awe-inspiring—you find **Him!**
- That because this God is the epitome of courage, excellence, purity, goodness, kindness, patience, peace, love and intelligence—being **like** Him and being **close** to Him is a good and desirable thing, because it’s **His** beauty we see in the compassion of a Mother Theresa. When we see the passion and justice of a Martin Luther King, Jr., it’s **Him**. When we see Bono’s heart for the poor and victimized in this world, it’s **Him**.

-And that the truth of **Who** He is gets even more astounding. He **loves** me. He **knows** me. He **cares** about me. And **you**. I may not know how to connect with those things—but that is the character of God. And I want to ask you—do you believe that about God? Not **intellectually**; do you **really, REALLY** believe that—even though you may not understand it all?

2. The second big thing we're asking people to do is have confidence in Jesus; to believe that Jesus was a real historical person who was born, lived here, walked here and died here. And, specifically, that what He said about Himself is true. This means that the narratives about his life are accurate and written by eyewitnesses. And is there **evidence** to support all this? So, what did Jesus say about Himself?
  - a. Well, He claimed to be the Son of God. He claimed that He had pre-existed with the Father and that He had the authority to call angels, resurrect the dead and judge the world. He claimed that He had been sent to this world as the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Old Testament.
  - b. He told his followers that if they had seen Him, they had seen the Father. Truth is, the record tells us that He did things only God could do, and showed his power over the forces and laws of nature by turning water to wine, walking on water, calming a storm, reversing disease—and death. He told his followers precisely how his life would end—and that he would rise from the dead. And it happened.
  - c. But, especially, he claimed to forgive sins; to be able to bring comfort and life to those who came to Him. He claimed, exclusively, to be the Savior of the world.
 

-Now, in asking people—maybe you—to believe this, we are **not** asking you to check your brain at the door. You will probably need to check this out for yourself.

-Please understand—**doubt is not a bad thing!** It's pretty natural—and keeps us out of trouble! But don't entrench in doubt and leave it at that—but to **explore! Dig!** Jesus **never** asked anyone to believe in Him without proof—but he did ask people, after seeing, after investigating—to **believe!**
  - d. See, if a person isn't convinced that Jesus was Who He claimed to be—Son of God, forgiver of sins, Savior of the world—then that simply makes Him crazy. Or a liar. Someone you'd **never** want to pattern your life after and trust. So, what **do** you believe about Jesus?

2. The second thing we at The Olive Branch want to help people believe...is that Jesus is **alive!** The cornerstone for faith in Jesus—in fact, the proof He gave the He **was** telling the truth—is that He didn't stay in the grave. Paul, quoted a hymn, a kind of ancient creed in a letter he wrote around 60 A.D.—that had obviously been around for a long time then. He said:
 

**I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles (1 Cor. 15:3-7 NLT).**

-Later on in this same passage, Paul lays out precisely how important this belief is. **And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave (1 Cor. 15:14-15 NLT).**

- a. Here's the deal, friends. If Jesus *isn't* alive, then the ancient narratives about his life are not telling the truth—and Jesus is just like any other religious leader who came along with a story about God—and then died and proved he was no different than *anyone* else. In that case, there's absolutely no reason to believe **anything** He says.
  - b. But if Jesus is alive—well, that changes everything! That means that, like He said, He has the final authority over everything. It means that He **way** more powerful than we can imagine. If He's alive, it means that He **can** forgive my sins and transform my life—**anyone's** life!  
-And it means that God, in fact, **is** in charge of history—and master of the **end**. Not us, not George W., the guy running Iran, the terrorists, nuclear warfare, global warming or some mutant virus.
3. The final thing we want people to find evidence for, believe—and **trust**—is that Jesus is right about **everything**. See, if we believe that Jesus is right about everything, then that has **huge** implications for how we live. How many of you trust that your instincts are always right? That how you **feel** at any given moment about something—about the right direction to take, the right thing to do, the right thing to invest in—is pretty accurate? If you do, I'm glad you have that kind of confidence in yourself! I don't. My sense of direction gets skewed. Sometimes I **feel** things that aren't there. My sense of what is the right thing to do gets messed up by past experiences, fear, anger, just plain being **chicken**, and by...**junk!**
- a. Every single day I am—**you** are bombarded by a whole **pile** of messages—and most of them are wrong; most of them appeal to my pride, my insecurity, my fear of being rejected—and my lust, greed, and selfishness:  
\***Buy this product! You want it...you need it...!**  
\***Anesthetize yourself! Escape your pain!**  
\***Focus on your body and what everyone thinks of it, not your soul...**  
\***Impress other people...don't worry about pleasing God!**  
\***Go after power, pleasure, prestige...those are the things that will satisfy your deepest needs...not God!**
  - b. If we don't have **someone** who can tell us the truth, we will get way off track—we will end up on detours and dead ends.  
-Jesus tells me the truth about **me**; about how I need to deal with my sin, how I need to deal with broken relationships. He is alive—and He tells me the truth about myself—even if I don't want to hear it!  
-Something else. Jesus tells the truth about the way the world **is**. When you buck it, you are actually going contrary to the way God has set the whole thing up—and it will **wreck** you!
  - c. See, if Jesus was God—and He **wasn't** right about everything, then **what** wasn't He right about? Do we get to choose—like when it's something we don't **want** to do and messes with our private list of stuff? I become the editor? I squish and massage what he says and create the **way of Ken!**  
-If Jesus isn't right about **everything**, then why trust Him on **anything**?  
And how can He be Savior and not be right?

- B. I'll tell you, based on this, what kind of church I believe God is calling The Olive Branch to be. I believe that God is calling us, **not** to be a religion, where we have all the creeds and answers nailed down, where we're **right**, and everyone else is **wrong**; where faith becomes dogma and ritual; where spirituality is about how much information you've memorized. I think that leads to **bad faith**.
1. I think Jesus is calling us all to a **living** faith. To the **Jesus revolution**, a totally subversive moment of outrageous love going on right this moment around the world. A faith that takes us into scary places; where it's not like Jesus died and ascended and left us a rule book so we could organize His religion really well. Jesus had most of his problems with religious people and was eventually condemned and crucified by them. And he has **not** called us to be religious or bring people to the religion he founded. Jesus didn't die to found a religion—he died to save people **from** religion—trying to reach God their own way. -He specifically said, "I didn't **come** to **condemn** the world; I came to **save** the world!" And He hasn't called us to condemn the world either—but to be his agents, His representatives—on a mission of grace and hope and peace and life wherever we go.
  2. Know what else I'm pretty convinced of? I'm convinced of the **logic** of our faith. That there's proof for what we believe is true. But I'm also convinced that people are not won by logic or arguments. They're won by the power of God showing through the weakness and vulnerability of our lives. They're won by supernatural love and servanthood and goodness and kindness and grace. Listen to one of the closing comments Alice makes **after** she believes: ***You know, all the logic and reasoning that people always say about Jesus...is just so lame, in my eyes, [compared] to feeling like your heart is going to explode when you start to see just how wonderful Jesus is...when you start to understand that Jesus ISN'T dead. I never understood that. I think a major part of my little epiphany was realizing that God is so far beyond all that petty logic and knowledge. At least, that's how it is for me. I'm sure for other people, the logic is great. But when proof stops at logic for me, it is pretty lame. And I am seeing it everywhere! I all these people's faces, in handshakes, in tears, in coincidences, in need. The Spirit is so alive!***
  3. We need logic. We need to count the cost. We need to know, "Is Jesus real?" But the life of Jesus always travels through real human lives, not through cool-sounding arguments. Arguments make **us** want to argue—and the living Christ is so much more massive and powerful and alive than that! What am I saying? The bottom line for The Olive Branch is having people who are **believable!** People for whom the power of God has made it **beyond** their minds and into their lives; **beyond** weekend services; **beyond** how much they know. It's a matter, really, of whether or not we live like Jesus, look like Jesus, and love like Jesus. -It's one thing to say that Jesus was right in everything He taught; it's quite another to actually let Him be in charge of your life; that you **so** believe He's right about life—that you actually live the life He came to give you! -I want to ask you—are you believable? Would someone from the outside, looking at your level of humility, teachability, love, compassion—the way you use your money and time—say that there's enough like Jesus there that you **must** be related to Him? Would your life make it easier for them to believe—or harder?

#### IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. I thought it might be good this morning to talk to you about where you are—how your relationship with God is doing. Think about your relationship with Him in some of the terms we use: Would you describe yourself as:  
**Strangers?...or Acquaintances?**  
**Dating? Engaged? Happily married?**  
Or would it be more like: *Unhappily married? Separated? Divorced?* Or something in between. Where **are** you?
- B. Jesus offers you this morning what he offered people when He walked here 2000 years ago. His friendship. His companionship. And His power! And when you know him and love him and trust Him—you find **life! Really!**