

Sermon for Zion - June 16, 2019 – Father’s Day, Confirmation

Hymns: “Everybody Sing Praise to the Lord”; 328 – This Is My Fathers World;
“Lord, I Believe”; 472 - We are God’s people

Scripture: 1 John 1:1-4 – New Living Translation

Sermon Title: “What We Believe, Who We Believe, And Why”

1 John 1:1-4 (NLT)

We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy.

Imagine this scenario:

You’re on a plane. Or a train, or a bus, whatever you can most easily imagine. There’s been a delay, and you’ll be sitting there for an hour, with nothing to do. You pull out a little pocket Bible you happen to have with you, and start reading. The stranger next to you notices, and asks you why you’re reading the Bible. You reluctantly admit that you are a Christian. The stranger now says to you: “I’ve always wondered what Christianity is really all about. Since we’re sitting here doing nothing, how about you tell me, in five minutes or less, just what it is Christians believe.”

It happened to me, many years ago. I did the best I could, given the time limitations. I’d love to tell you that the person was miraculously converted on the spot, but instead, all I got was, “OK, thanks, that’s good.” He then opened his newspaper in the universal language of, “I now want to be left alone.” That’s still better than my friend Ross, who teaches at our college in Vancouver. When he told the person seated next to him on the airplane that he teaches at a Christian college, the person promptly called the stewardess and asked for a new seat.

What would you say if someone asked you what you believe – if they gave you five minutes to explain the Christian faith? I’d love to hear your answers. But since there are too many of you for me to listen to all at once, pretend for a moment that one of the people sitting around you is the stranger on the airplane.

Turn to one of them, right now, and give it a shot. Five minutes, what it is you believe, and switching seats is not allowed. Go!

OK, how many people knew exactly what to say? Not so easy, is it? Fortunately, we have help. From its very beginning, the church has thought hard about this very question, this very situation. What is it we believe? Is there a way to explain it all in a few minutes, maybe even while on public transportation? The Bible even tells a story much like I outlined above. While they didn't have buses or planes or trains back then, they did have carriages, and people who wanted to know what to believe. Listen:

Acts 8:26-38 (NLT)

As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, "Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah. The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage." Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah.

Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The man replied, "How can I, unless someone instructs me?" And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him...

So... Philip told him the Good News about Jesus. As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?" He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

Obviously, whatever Philip told the Ethiopian did the trick. Philip was ready with an answer, and that answer was the Good News. And we are all expected, as Christians, to be equally ready with an answer. Here's what Paul wrote to Timothy, a student under his care (2 Timothy 4:2-5 NLT):

Share the word of God. Be prepared, whether the time is favourable or not. Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching. For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth and chase after myths. But you should keep a clear mind

in every situation. Don't be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you.

Paul saw that the time was coming “*when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth and chase after myths.*” If that doesn't describe our world, I don't know what does. So we need to be ready, to be prepared, whenever the opportunity might present itself, to “*share the word of God;*” to “*work at telling others the Good News.*”

But how do we know what to tell? How can we be sure that what we are sharing really is the truth of God? The very first Christians were wondering the same thing. How can we know who Jesus really is? What Jesus really said? What Jesus really did? What Jesus really called us to do? And for their answer, they turned to the Apostles, to those who spent years together with Jesus, experiencing him, hearing him, learning from him first-hand. So that there would be no confusion, no mistake, these Apostles began to write things down, to put down in print the truth of our faith. That's how the New Testament came into being; it is the guidebook to the real story of Jesus, and the truth of what we believe. As John says near the end of his Gospel (John 20:31), *These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

This same John, in addition to his Gospel, wrote several letters to churches that were having struggles about what to believe, and to whom they should listen. John tells them, “Take it from those of us who knew Jesus best (*1 John 1:1-4*):”

We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy.

So, our trustworthy source of belief is the Bible; everything we say about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit; about God's relationship to the world and

our relationship with him; needs to depend on, be based upon, and constantly refer back to, the Bible – the testimony of those who were with and saw and heard Jesus, first-hand. But because the Bible is pretty big – even the New Testament is the size of a 300 page book – the early church thought it might be both important and handy to summarize what we believe in a short, easily memorisable statement, and it did so in a series of Creeds.

“Creed” comes from the Latin word “Credo,” meaning “I believe.” There are a number of creeds, beginning with the very first one in the Old Testament, through to the end of the Bible in the Book of the Revelation. Here are just a few:

Deut. 6:4: Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

John 11:25-27: Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord, I believe (Credo!) that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

Acts 16:31: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

1 Cor. 8:6: for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Phil. 2:6-11: Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

1 Tim. 3:16: Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

Early Christians would have memorized these creeds, either in word or in song, and held on to them as short-and-sweet statements of their belief. However, very soon the need was realised for a more complete single statement of the faith. And so arose what we call the Apostles' Creed. Remembering that "Creed" comes from the word "Credo," meaning "I believe;" the Apostles' Creed means both what the Apostles believed and taught, and what we received from them and now believe as well. While the Apostles' Creed isn't in the Bible, all of the statements and teachings within it are. The early church agreed that these were the words of belief that all Christians share, these words reflect and summarize the true teaching of the Apostles, and today, two millennia later, we confess the very same summary of Apostolic teaching and belief.

The earliest form of this Creed that we have a record of – it may well, of course, be much older than our earliest copy – is from around 200 A.D., from a Baptism service. A Christian teacher named Hippolytus recorded it for us:

*When the person being baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say:
"Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?" And the person being baptized shall say: "I believe." Then holding his hand on his head, he shall baptize him once.
And then he shall say: "Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?" And when he says: "I believe," he is baptized again.
And again he shall say: "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?" The person being baptized shall say: "I believe," and then he is baptized a third time.*

I'm telling you, when Hippolytus baptised you, you knew you were baptised! More importantly, when you were baptised, you were baptised into a community of faith that carried in its heart and in its belief the testimony of the Apostles, the words of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and the faith we share in Jesus Christ.

The young people coming forward today have been baptized as well. And now they have reached a point in their life of faith that that wish to publicly confess their belief. For those baptised in infancy or childhood, it is the important second

part of Baptism. Living Faith, the Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, puts it this way:

“God's grace and our response to it are not tied to the moment of Baptism, but continue and deepen throughout life... Baptism is an act of discipleship that requires commitment and looks towards growth in Christ. Those baptized in infancy are called in later years to make personal profession of Christ... Congregations and those baptized must strive to nurture life in Christ.

Baptism assures us that we belong to God. In life and in death our greatest comfort is that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.”

In confessing their faith, those being confirmed today are making their personal profession of their faith in Christ. They have participated in the life of the church throughout these past years, and this year they have joined me over several months in Confirmation Sessions, where we have gone through the Apostles' Creed in detail. Today, they are proclaiming their commitment to Christ, their intention to follow him as Lord and Saviour, and their adherence to the Apostolic Faith.

We too share the faith of the Apostles. We too continue to hold fast and to testify to one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is that which links us together with those who preceded us in the faith, those around the world with whom we share a common faith, and those with whom we work out our faith. And so we celebrate with our young people, as we celebrate with all who seek to be the church in this and every age, with the words of the Apostles' Creed. Together, we proclaim our commitment to Christ, our intention to follow him as Lord and Saviour, and our adherence to the Apostolic Faith.

May each of us come to know “What We Believe, Who We Believe, And Why;” may we be ready to share our faith with any and with all; may we live lives which reflect our faith, and the One whom we follow; and together, with all God's faithful people from every time and place, join with the whole creation to lift our hearts in joyful praise, that *“at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

Amen!