

*This I Believe*  
*The Phoenix Affirmations*  
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Call to Worship

In this season of This I Believe, when we are speaking here, together, of the beliefs that we hold in common and the beliefs that make us different from one another, I offer you this creed that I imagine holds the experience of many of the people in this church:

We believe in God  
Whose love we know  
In the beauty of his world,  
In daily bread,  
In the kindness of human hearts,  
And most clearly in Jesus of Nazareth.  
We believe that Jesus is the Christ  
Whose touch of grace  
Makes our eyes to see,  
Our ears to hear,  
Strengthens us to do all things in him,  
And delivers us from death to life.  
We believe in the Holy Spirit  
In whose power there is peace,  
In whose presence there is joy,  
And in whose promise we dare to be more.

Sermon

Do you know what the scariest thing is about being a preacher? The thing that can make me feel like I have to just close my eyes and keep going, because if I think about it too much I get dizzy? It's the possibility—no, actually it's the likelihood—that one day when I'm not preaching, when I'm driving or shopping or rushing from one place to another, you'll see me and see that my actions sometimes don't match my words. That I can't live all the things I tell you on Sundays that God wants and intends and hopes for all of us.

There's a word for that: hypocrisy. That's what we call it when there's a big gap between our words and our actions.

Hypocrisy drove Jesus crazy. It drew his sharpest criticism, his harshest condemnation. You can boil down quite a few of Jesus' teachings into a single lesson: 'Don't tell me what your religion says. Show me with your actions what you believe, what's inside of you that is shaping your life.'

Every time Jesus was asked, ‘What must I do to have eternal life?’ or ‘What will matter in the end?’ his response was something that had in it some form of the verb *do*. His responses to those questions were never tests of the questioner’s beliefs. They were always about actions. Feed the hungry. Forgive. See people who are different from you and lean toward them with compassion. Give away the possessions that keep you from living a life responsive to God.

But Jesus also wasn’t focused on creating a code of conduct. He never did compose a set of rules to live by. The life Jesus called his followers to was something different from the Ten Commandments. It was something more like *integrity*: a life in which your conduct—the way you act, the quality of your relationships with other people, the way you pay attention to God—matches the convictions and values that live and grow inside of you.

Over the centuries since Jesus lived, his followers—the Church—have put time and money and attention into different ways of expressing their faith. In the Middle Ages, the Church’s devotion was expressed largely through architecture. Massive, beautiful, extravagantly constructed and decorated cathedrals said, ‘We will build a magnificent place for a glorious God.’ Today, those cathedrals are mostly empty. They’re still beautiful, but they no longer capture or seem necessary to our faith. They’re more like museums, less like places where the Spirit seems alive and active.

In the modern era, from the 18th century Enlightenment through much of the 20th century, the focus was on doctrine, finding and defending and persuading people about a careful, very precise belief system. Brian McLaren calls it “the church of the last detail.” Much like those cathedrals, focusing on right belief now seems outdated, not an accurate or meaningful way of identifying followers of Jesus, people of faith.

We live now in what is often called a post-modern culture. The question Christianity has to answer in these days is not ‘What’s the set of beliefs that will put you right with God?’ It’s something more like ‘What helps people live full and meaningful lives? How does our religion change us, so that we are living—and creating a world where *everyone* can live—joyfully, peacefully, content, kind, generous—in short, Christ-like?’ The question we ask ourselves is not ‘If I were to die tonight, would I spend eternity in heaven?’ It’s ‘If I keep living, what kind of person will I be?’

So—does all this mean that what you believe no longer matters?  
I don’t think so.

We all believe in something. We put our trust, our confidence, our hope in *something*. Our families; our retirement accounts; a better government. Conscious or not, each of us acts out of core convictions buried deep inside of us. And those beliefs seep out into everything you do. Not just what where you spend Sunday mornings, but *everything* you do—at home, at work, in your relationships with other people, in your reactions to what happens to you and to what happens in the world. Our actions speak our faith, sometimes in surprising, unintentional ways.

Years ago, a wise spiritual person who had listened to me talk about my life and who knew me better than I realized asked me, “Do you really believe that God would love you if you didn’t

work so hard?” Ouch. I know—and I knew then—the *right* answer to that question. The true answer looked like something different, more visible in my days than in my creed.

I doubt I’m the only one whose actions suggest that I might have a hidden, unspoken belief: that faith is actually a self-improvement project.

But it’s not.

The commitment to be a follower of Jesus is not the same thing as a resolution to be a better person. You don’t stop judging other people, or live a holier life, or extend yourself toward others’ need, through grit, by whipping yourself into shape. You do it by opening yourself up to relationship, a love, that grows inside of you and softens your heart with a constant flow of humility and compassion. Your beliefs don’t make that happen, but they can make room for it to happen. They give you a place to stand, a stance that keeps you facing toward the One who changes people from the inside out.

Some years ago, Marcus Borg tried to capture, in a systematic way, the essence of what it means to believe as a Christian. I’m using his words because they’re in a language that we speak today and can understand. But these thoughts are not much different from what John Wesley said more than two hundred years ago, in the language of his time. Borg said Christians share three essential beliefs:

- That there is a God who is real and who is alive. “Something More” than what humans are capable of seeing and understanding, a God who is good, who looks on creation with love, who wants for us a full and good human life.
- That Jesus is central in our faith. Christians are people who see Jesus as the best, most reliable, the *ultimate*, disclosure of who God is and what a life full of God looks like. That doesn’t mean Jesus is the only way that God has revealed himself, but for Christians, Jesus is the one in whom we see God most clearly.
- That the Bible is our sacred text. We will differ on how to understand and interpret the Bible’s stories and teachings, but for all Christians, this is our foundational document, the set of words that we look to first for our identity. In other words, we’re not making the Christian tradition up as we go. Our faith is related to what people before us have believed.

That’s it. Pretty much everything else we can talk about, disagree on, interpret differently. The truth of everything else you believe gets measured not by some standard of correct doctrine, but by how it shapes the way you live.

Many people have tried to put a living, relevant, powerful Christian faith into words. We’ve been trying to do that for ourselves these last few weeks. And there are many contemporary creeds, or affirmations of faith. The one I want to offer you this morning is called the *Phoenix Affirmations*. It’s printed on the insert inside your bulletin. You’ll see, right next to the title, “Version 3.8”, which means that this is a statement that keeps getting revised. It’s not intended to be the kind of creed people will recite as authority a hundred or a thousand years from now.

It's a snapshot, not a portrait. But for one group of Jesus-followers who live in the early 21st century, in the Southwestern part of the United States, it's a thoughtful statement about what a life of following Jesus looks like.

I hope you'll take that piece of paper home with you today and spend some time with it. See if it gives words to some beliefs you've held but didn't know how to say. Choose different words where it doesn't quite hit the mark for you. If some piece of it strikes you as perfect this morning, maybe you can write that sentence onto our graffiti table before you leave today.

There's a funny story that goes with writing of the Phoenix Affirmations. Eric Elnes, a United Church of Christ pastor who led the project, kept hearing a young woman in his congregation say, "I'm tired of being a Christian butt." What? he kept thinking; why would a nice young woman use that kind of language? Finally asked her: What do you mean by that? She answered right away. "I mean," she said, "that I'm tired of having always to qualify the word *Christian* when I tell people I'm going to church. I find myself throwing in the word *but* all the time: 'I'm a Christian, but...' But I'm not *that* kind of Christian...but I don't believe what you think I do...but I don't think everyone else is wrong and I'm right."

And so they began to work on a positive statement of what it means to be a Christian, something that replaces the words "I'm a Christian, but..."

It's important to know what you do believe, to know what is truth for you. To write it down, maybe even to say it out loud. Whether you are conscious of it or not, your beliefs explain who you are, who you're becoming. Or maybe it's just who you'd like to become, and that's OK too.

Many years ago, when the world was no less dangerous than it is now, the prophet Jeremiah heard a word from God. "The time is coming," Jeremiah heard, "when I will make a new covenant with my people. I will put my instructions inside of them. Engrave my words on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." Think about that: when God thought about the most important way to save the words God wanted people to remember, it wasn't on microchips, or in books, or on stone tablets. It was on human hearts. Your heart. Because no matter how sketchy we are at living out our intentions, God believes in us. Trusts that what we are becoming, what the whole world can see in our lives, is the truest story God has to tell. May we grow into that trust.

#### Sources and Suggested Reading

Ronald J. Allen, *Naming a Faith of Your Own: Naming What You Really Believe*

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*

Philip Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology for Church and Society*

Eric Elnes, *The Phoenix Affirmations: A New Vision for the Future of Christianity*

Brian McLaren, *Finding Faith: A Search for What Makes Sense*

Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*

Martin Thielen, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?: A Guide to What Matters Most*