

This I Believe
Credo: What Does It Mean to 'Believe'?
John 3:16

Call to Worship

“This I Believe” is the theme of this season in our worship. Unlike reciting a creed in the company of other voices, to say out loud “this is what *I* believe” is intensely personal...and it requires courage. There are few times or places in our lives these days, where we declare ourselves publicly—especially about our religious beliefs.

And so it's easy to go along for a long time without *knowing* exactly what you believe or who you are as a person of spirit and faith.

The poet David Whyte wrote a beautiful statement of his own truth, what matters most to him. He called it *Self Portrait*.

It doesn't interest me if there is one God
or many gods.
I want to know if you belong or feel
abandoned.
If you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know
if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need
to change you. If you can look back
with firm eyes
saying this is where I stand. I want to know
if you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward
the center of your longing. I want to know
if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.
I have heard, in that fierce embrace, even
the gods speak of God.

Whoever you are, whatever you believe, whatever you seek—bring it to the God that all the gods speak of. It—and you—are welcomed; you are accepted; you are loved.

Sermon

There was a time—a long time, actually—when I lost my faith entirely. I was a young adult. I had just finished law school. While I studied law, I was taught to think critically about just about everything, to question and probe what other people wrote or said until it made sense to me. I'd learned to dig through layers of evidence to find something that might be called the 'truth'. And as I learned those skills, much of what I had until then just accepted as part of Christian faith stopped making sense to me. When I asked questions, or said I wasn't sure I believed those things, it felt like I was doing something wrong, like I hadn't done my homework or looked in the right place for the obvious answers. Looking back, I'm not sure that anyone actually said any of those things to me. Maybe it was just the voice inside my head.

In any event, I left church. I just stopped going. I thought that to stay, I'd have to pretend to believe in things that seemed to me un-believable. What I wanted was a place to talk about my doubts, my big questions. I was uncomfortable around people who seemed so much more sure than I was. I didn't go back to church again for ten years.

When I did try church again, I'd lost the thread of faith. "What does 'faith' mean?" I wondered. If I say "I believe" about the right things—that Jesus was the Son of God, that he died for our sins, that he rose on Easter—does that do it? Would saying 'yes' to those things make me a Christian, a believer, a person who belongs in church?

For the next few weeks, we're going to be talking in worship about what it means to 'believe'. About what Christians collectively have believed—now and in the past—and about how that has changed over time. We're encouraging you to think for yourself about what *you* believe. Some of you have already sent me your *This I Believe* statements, and you'll see a few excerpts from those on the screens during the offering in a little bit. You have another invitation to do that inside your bulletin this morning, and another on the front page of the church's website. Keep sending them, all through the month of February. If you've already sent something and you think of something else, or you change your mind, send it to me again. And as you leave worship this morning, you'll find in the Narthex a wood table that Carol Damonte made. That table is our *This I Believe* graffiti wall for this season. It's a place for you to write—right on the table!—a belief that you're conscious of this morning. In all these ways, we are gathering up the beliefs among us. Some of them we share; some of them are what distinguishes us from one another. All of them are welcome here.

Does it matter what you believe? Can't you be a good person without believing anything? We all know people who are just good-hearted, without any religion or even philosophy to guide them. Generosity, kindness, honesty, compassion—all those good-value actions can come out of anyone, whether they're religious or not—right? Isn't it our actions that matter? Can you just work on those things, brush up your capacity to give, to listen, to love other people, without subscribing to any religious beliefs? What matters more—what you believe, or how you live? In some strands of Christianity, what makes someone a Christian is a certain set of beliefs: sometimes there's a confession, or a statement of doctrine, that you have to subscribe to to get right with God, and to identify yourself as part of this religious group. What makes Christianity different from other religions, this view would say, is a particular set of beliefs. In fact, on the

website beliefnet.com, you can find a tool they call Belief-O-Matic. The introduction to this very handy tool says,

Even if YOU don't know what faith you are, Belief-O-Matic knows. Answer 20 questions about your concept of God, the afterlife, human nature, and more, and Belief-O-Matic will tell you what religion (if any) you practice...or ought to consider practicing.

That's got to be tongue-in-cheek, of course. But the reason it's funny is that it's not far off the dogmatic way religion is often approached. You know, I think, that belief all by itself isn't worth much. You can believe all the right things and still be mean, or miserable, tied up in your fear or worry or resentment. Intellectual faith—believing the right things about God—all by itself, doesn't transform your life.

But neither are actions alone what makes a person of faith, or a 'good Christian.' What matters is how your beliefs and actions line up. Our beliefs are supposed to give form to our lives. If we believe in things that matter, our beliefs should be working on us from the inside out, re-shaping us, so that we live differently than we would on our own.

So maybe the best way to measure the truth of your beliefs is to look at their impact on your life. Does what you believe about God, Jesus, yourself, humanity, make you less afraid? More generous? More loving? If the answer is 'yes', then it seems like you've found something that is true and good. If your faith makes you more judgmental or angry, or it focuses you mostly on what other people are doing wrong, then I wonder if your God is the same God of love Jesus talked about. And if you believe a lot of things that have *no* impact on the way you live, what does that say?

"Creeds" are what we call statements of faith, or beliefs, that the Church has adopted at different times over the last 2,000 years. The word "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo*. *Credo* is a good word. It's bigger, more powerful, than just saying, "Yeah...I believe that." *Credo* means: This is the truth that lives inside of me. It changes how I act, what I do, how I think about everything else.

The root of the word *credo* suggests something that isn't passive belief at all. It means something more like "what I give my heart to". The thing you believe in, that becomes your *credo*, engages you at a deeper level than your intellect. It's belief that happens at your center, in your gut. To have a *credo* is to engage deeply, to be in relationship with, the thing you believe in. In Christianity, the object of this kind of believing isn't a statement or a proposition; it's a person: we believe in the God who looks like the person we know as Jesus Christ. In English, the word *believe* is related to the word *be-love*. What we believe is what we love. Who we believe in is whom we love.¹

That famous verse we read a few moments ago—John 3:16—comes at the end of a conversation that Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, we are told—which

¹ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 39-40.

means he's someone who was already working hard at his religion. He came to Jesus because Jesus had said some things that made Nicodemus think again about what he believed. Nicodemus was asking Jesus about truth. How do I know what is true? he asked. I'm drawn to what you say, but how can I know for sure that you're speaking something true? That listening to you will take me closer to God?

Jesus' response was, frankly, pretty confusing—to Nicodemus, and to us. He said some hard-to-understand things--about being born of the Spirit, about how God comes and goes like the wind, how no one can actually understand God fully. But at the end of this conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus said one sentence with such beauty and strength, that ever since it was written down, people have grabbed onto it and held tight.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.*

So often, this verse is read as though what Jesus meant by it was to divide the world into believers and non-believers. And sometimes Jesus did put people in categories; there were moments he talked about wheat and weeds, sheep and goats, trees that produce fruit and those that don't. But not here. That's not what this saying is about. Jesus wasn't trying here to create conditions, or draw limits on the reach of God's love. He wasn't drawing a line to keep some people out. What he wanted to convey to Nicodemus wasn't even about what people are required to do. It was about who God is. About what giving your heart to—*be-loving*—that God makes possible.

I think what Jesus was saying was something more like this:

This is how much God loves the world: God is giving you the best part of himself, the most precious thing God could imagine offering. And here's why: so you will know that no one is ever too far lost to be found again. That no one is too used up to find life again. That what God believes is that anyone—everyone—can live a whole life, a flourishing life. Believe it...be-love it. Give your heart to that God.

And that, my friends, is the whole Gospel, in one sentence. Love this God, because that love will change everything. It will turn you around. It will propel you toward doing justice, loving kindness, treating your neighbor as yourself. That's what it means to believe in God. To believe God. To make God your *credo*.

I want to say one more thing. Many of us are more practiced at saying what we don't believe in than we are at explaining what we do believe. It's easy to spot the beliefs you reject, especially in a tradition with as long and checkered a history as Christianity. I have a friend, a pastor who is a much tougher cookie than I am, who would say to her congregation, "Stop fighting with the God you don't believe in and find the one you do." Who is the God worth believing in, shaping your life around? Find that God. Let *that* God occupy space in your life. Love *that* God. Let *that* God be the one you give your heart to.