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21:58

To Creed or Not To Creed  
The United Church of Christ: Theology  
Luke 17: 11-19

What do we believe?

I am not asking what you believe, but what do we believe, as a church, as a denomination, the United Church of Christ?

What do we believe? This denomination, in the year 2019.

The history and theology of the Christian church is interesting, written by the winners, like most history. The church has struggled over the centuries to define what it means to be a Christian, what true belief is, what we could agree on, and what was definitely out—heresy--and often punishable by death.

You see, deciding what we believe as a group can be dangerous stuff.

What do we believe?

That Jesus is the son of God?

That we will be resurrected after we die and go to heaven?

That we all have original sin and can only be saved by confessing Jesus Christ to be our Savior otherwise we go to hell?

That Mary the mother of Jesus was a virgin?

Do we believe these things? What do we believe?

When we talk about belief in churches we often talk about creeds. You may know the word creed. Webster's defines creed as:

1. a brief authoritative formula of religious belief
- 2 : a set of fundamental beliefs
- 3: a guiding principle

Now I think there sure is a lot of difference between an authoritative formula and a guiding principle. In my childhood home a guiding principle was "please be home by dark." An authoritative formula was "you will not hit your brother!"

When we talk about creeds we are talking about what we as a church believe, what we agree to believe as a whole. What does that mean? We have many creeds in the church, (by that I mean the church universal), the Apostles creed, the Nicene creed etc.

How many of you learned a creed at a previous church community. Or should I just start, and see how many of you can mumble along with me...

"I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

of all that is, seen and unseen....” (Nicean creed)

Creeds are summations of essential points of faith. They are created by committee. And you thought church committees were a newer invention. No, these committees were gathered, usually to solve a problem with a pressing point of heresy.

For example the Nicene creed was written in Nicea, Turkey in the mid-300's to make sure there was clarity in the church about Jesus' human nature, that he was human and divine, not one or the other as some Christians called Arians were espousing at the time. "The creed was a response to the "Arian" movement, which challenged the church's teaching that Christ was both fully human and fully divine. Arians emphasized the humanity of Christ, and therefore believed he was "subordinate" to God the Father. But the faith proclaimed in Constantinople was in a Christ who was both, and therefore "of one being" with the Father." (ucc.org)

Creeds have been used in many ways over the years. They were used to help organize the early church. They were used to bring people together around what we had in common. They were used to teach the Christian faith. They were also used to exclude people who had questions. And, at their most extreme, they were used to persecute and sometimes kill people who did not agree.

But what does the UCC do with the creeds? This is what the UCC says:

“The United Church of Christ embraces a theological heritage that affirms the Bible as the authoritative witness to the Word of God, the creeds of the ecumenical councils, and the confessions of the Reformation.

“The UCC has roots in the "covenantal" tradition—meaning there is no centralized authority or hierarchy that can impose any doctrine or form of worship on its members. Christ alone is Head of the church.

“We seek a balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith. The UCC therefore receives the historic creeds and confessions of our ancestors as testimonies, but not tests of the faith.”

Testimonies not tests. You see the UCC is non-creedal or free church. This means we embrace the creeds as part of our tradition. We are informed by them but we are not bound by them, not limited by how they imperfectly define the nature of God, Christ, spirit, people, the holy. We keep trying to describe our experience as Christians in relationship to God and many times this resulted in a creed but the UCC does not think that these creeds are the perfect rendering of our faith. This does not mean we do not have any theology or beliefs, but that when we say what we believe, we do things a little differently than some of our Christian brothers and sisters.

In 1959 as the UCC was coming together as a new denomination in its historic merger, members of the UCC wrote the UCC Statement of Faith, a statement to capture what we say we believe. We've been reading it in worship this morning. All the pieces in your bulletin that are marked are parts of the UCC statement of Faith [attached at end]. It is also on the front of your bulletin. That Statement of Faith is a helpful guide in thinking through our history and what we believe. You might look through it and see if you agree with what it says.

I always use it in New Member and confirmation classes and usually there is very animated discussion about it, in part because we do not like to be told what to believe. The freedom of the UCC, of our tradition, values the discovery, the questioning, the process of faith. So we wrestle with who is God, who is Jesus, what is a miracle, or resurrection.

But again, we are more than just individuals. We come together and we are asked, “well, UCC people, what do you believe, do you believe in anything?”

Yes, this is our statement of faith. It is not a creed, not a legalistic interpretation of the faith which we agree or disagree with, a line separating who is in and who is out. It is an attempt to capture what this faithful body of believers is doing and why.

You do not have to believe every part of the Statement of Faith to be a part of the UCC or to be a part of Pilgrim. But it might help you in thinking through the Christian faith, this gift of theology refined over centuries and handed to us to preserve and pass on.

What do we believe as the United Church of Christ?

God creates...

God loves...

God judges...

Christ came and leads us forward by example...

God calls us to love others...

And God will never, ever, ever leave or abandon us.

What do we as the UCC believe is one question but why should I care as an individual?

It is important that we are not ignorant. We should know our tradition

It is important because these words of faith, these “I believes” still play a role in our society, in politics, in religion, in science.

It is important because as we seek to share with our children or our family or our neighbors answers to the questions: why do we volunteer, why do we support the church, why do we share our money, why?

This statement of faith perhaps is helpful in offering answers. We have some grounding from which to answer.

Because I am called to love and serve other human beings.

Because I am following in Jesus’ footsteps.

Because God created the earth and I am to care for it.

Because I believe there is a divinity active in the world that helps me.

It is important because the more we see God at work in our lives, the more we shall experience that healing, loving presence and direction.

In today’s scripture Jesus heals ten folks suffering from leprosy that he meets on the road.

They all leave rejoicing but the one leper comes back to Jesus to thank him. One out of ten and Jesus tells him your faith has made you well. Not that the leper has been healed by coming back. The other nine are ok, they are healed physically.

But the one comes back, wanting to know what or why or how, wanting to offer thanks to Jesus for this. Jesus says to him your faith has made you well. He is the one that finds faith. A re-entering the place of God, the presence of Christ, with thanksgiving and with and understanding of who we are and who God is.

And as we re-enter the presence of God we are often moved to thanks and praise. Just like we do every Sunday morning. In fact Martin Luther called worship “the tenth leper coming back.” I love that image. That we here this morning, and every Sunday morning, are the tenth leper coming to say thank you and I want to be in the presence of the one who can heal and bring hope back into my life. We are the tenth leper.

Even now, right now, there are thousands of UCC folks gathered in Milwaukee for the 32nd general synod, our denomination's gathering every two years.

Why does it matter that we are UCC?

Because at this gathering there are things you'd likely not see at other gatherings. The resolutions that will be voted on include  
designating a sexual violence remembrance Sunday in the church calendar  
adopting non-binary gender language  
taking action against forced global migration  
pledging to get rid of styrofoam

There are other different things going on that speak about who we are as a people  
there is a place to get tested for HIV  
there is a place to donate blood that will provide for the local community  
there's a huge fundraiser that will be collected, not for the UCC but earmarked specifically for children  
and a street festival--see we aren't always just serious-minded folks, we can actually have fun, too

What do we believe, as the UCC, as Pilgrim church, as individual people of God?

However we name it, however we find words to capture it, "our faith shall make us well."

For what do we believe, "We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify.

"Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God." Amen.