

Easter VI, Year A

May 21, 2017

Sermon, Holy Spirit, Cumming

What do you believe? And why does it matter?

Faith is important because it is what motivates us. Faith inspires us to do what we do, live how we live. Whether we are religious or not, we all have faith.

For some, it is faith in **Self**. We hear it in the words of the poem, “I am the Master of my Fate...” or the title of the old self-help book, *Looking Out for #1*. Faith in Self means that each of us must do what is needed to succeed in life regardless of our differences in capacity and resources. Those who cannot do it on their own are often ignored and left behind.

Related to faith in Self, but slightly different, is faith in **Power**. We want to be part of the winning side of life. When we figure out that we cannot do it by ourselves, we are willing to hitch our wagon to the person or movement we see as most powerful, most likely to win. Our faith in that case gives us a (false) sense of certainty in an uncertain world.

There are other types of faith in our culture. Some are better than others. Some are combined with others to form a hybrid. This often happens with the Christian faith. **Self**-centered Christianity. **Power**-loving Christianity. It is fairly common to find throughout Church history and continues to be found today. The Church has too often been complicit with these unholy hybrids in the past (and today). So it is important for the Church to be clear about what we believe and why it matters.

The core of Christian faith is spelled out in the Nicene Creed. The language of the Creed is ancient and may seem to be written in code for modern ears. Yet it is clear regarding these three guiding principles of our faith:

1. God is Creator. God made all that we see and even what we do not see. And God sees creation—including us—as good.
2. God became human in Jesus. This belief, what Christians call the Incarnation, transforms how we see God and our fellow humans. The center of that transformation is “love.” We believe God loves and calls us to love, too.
3. God’s Spirit abides with us in the Church and even beyond the Church. The Spirit’s presence in the world is the active power that is changing us to be more like Jesus—to center our lives in love and empower us to forgive and be kind and patient.

Those are our three core beliefs as Christians. There are additional important parts, of course. But that is a good summary in 113 words. So if that is what we believe, why does it matter? Well, let’s turn to our readings for today to get some additional insight and clarity.

The reading from Acts is amazing. Paul, the Jewish rabbi and Christian missionary, has arrived at the center of Greek culture. The Areopagus is filled with statues of idols and the conversation of the wise. Paul is incensed at their idolatry (Acts 17:16), yet he desired to engage them and invite them into faith in the God of Jesus. So he does something unexpected—he quotes one of their own poets:

“For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”

What a powerful image. God as Creator is not a distant being making creation outside of God’s self. No, Creation exists within God. **We** exist within God. If we truly believe what Paul said, it transforms how we see the world. Instead of each one of us being on our own, fighting for what we need and want, we understand that we are part of God’s own inner life.

The image for this poetic line, “In him we live and move and have our being,” is that of a pregnant mother. All of creation is growing to completion and to birth within the womb of God. We are not finished yet, not just as individuals but as Creation. If we believe that, then we are called to a faith that is different from some of the hybrid Christian options marketed today. If we believe that we are part of a creation that exists within God, it makes us humble and holy, curious and courageous. That type of faith transforms us and how we live in God.

Today’s reading from I Peter moves from the expansive, cosmic belief in God as Creator of all to personal belief-- what is in your heart as a person of faith? Peter wrote:

“...but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”

An ancient and central part of the Christian faith is the confession that “Jesus is Lord.” Instead of being the master of my fate, Jesus is the Lord of my life. So Peter calls us to sanctify and revere Christ as Lord in our hearts. Central to our lives and our identity is Jesus. What he taught. How he lived. Our belief that Jesus is God-made-human. And our belief that after the Powerful executed him unjustly, God raised him from the dead and through Him began the transformation of the world.

So our faith in Jesus is the antidote to faith in Power. We believe even the most powerful person or empire will not endure. We believe God Almighty became human; starting as a little baby in a remote land under foreign domination; and eventually the man Jesus was killed by that same empire. But instead of eliminating Jesus as a problem for them, the empire’s act of power in killing Jesus was the beginning of the end for them and the beginning of the new creation for us as we continue to grow in God.

The passage from the Gospel of John continues to illumine what the Church believes—that the Spirit of God abides with us, that the Spirit of Truth is God’s gift to us to help us to

grow in what we understand and how we live in God. The Spirit is God's creative—and disruptive—presence in the world today.

When a different type of faith is offered to us, the Spirit of Truth reminds us of what is real and what is genuine in our lives in God. We believe the Spirit will lead us into all truth (John 16:13), most often in gentle and patient ways. Also, because we believe in the Spirit, we believe we are not alone; as Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphaned" (John 14:18). We believe the primary purpose of our lives on earth is to be inspired, guided, and transformed by God's Spirit so that we grow in our joyful worship of God and compassionate love for one another.

One way the Spirit will often transform us is through stories. Sometimes they come from the Scripture, like our readings for today. Sometimes they come from personal encounters with people who help us to understand the truth of our lives more fully. Some of us heard those Spirit-stories this past Wednesday when we visited people imprisoned in the Stewart Detention Center. The stories of the men we visited are heartbreaking, a combination of hope and despair. But if we take time to listen, stories like theirs will help us to understand more and more truth that helps us to grow beyond our comfort zone.

The Church believes that God is our Creator and that we exist within God. We believe that God became one of us in Jesus to transform us. And we believe that God's Spirit among us is the way that God continues to create and transform us into the image of Jesus.

So, what do you believe? Why does it matter? There are no more important questions for us to ponder, to answer, and to live by God's grace in our lifetimes.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.