

We believe in you
Exodus 14:19-31
September 14, 2008

If someone were to ask you, *What does your church believe?*, how would you answer? Could you answer?

My guess is that most of us would be a lot more comfortable talking about what our church does than about what it believes. We could talk about fellowship groups and mission projects and concerts and Bible studies. We could talk about our history and about some of the outstanding public servants that have been and still are members of our church. We could talk about our vision, our vision for mission and for youth ministry and for small group ministries.

But what we believe?

It seems like churches don't talk about that as much anymore, at least not churches like ours. We focus more on living out our faith than on clarifying the particulars of what that faith is. And that's a good thing, I think, because genuine faith is about doing. It's about transformation of ourselves and our world. It's about what God is up to, and about what God wants us to be up to, about knowing and doing what God wants, about knowing and doing God's will.

Following Jesus is what matters, not making sure you have your theology just right! Does it really matter if your eschatology is pre-millennial or post-millennial or a-millennial? See, you have no idea what I'm talking about, do you? But there was a time and a place -- there are still times and places -- when differences of belief about such matters divide churches and Christians and even disqualify otherwise well-qualified candidates from pastoral ministry! It is a good thing that we focus on living our faith instead of siccing the theology police on each other! And yet -- and yet -- what we believe does matter.

What we believe matters because our beliefs shape our actions. We feel obliged to forgive because we believe in a God who forgives us. We seek to be compassionate because we believe in a loving God. We care about justice for all people because we believe in a God who demands justice for all people. When we believe in hope, we act hopefully. When we believe in love, we act lovingly. When we believe in truth, we live honestly, or at least try to!

And what we believe matters because our beliefs hold us accountable. When I say I believe in a God who shows mercy, the mercy I show to the one who has wronged me proves the authenticity of my belief. When I say I believe the world is God's creation, I cannot not care about good stewardship of the earth and its resources without making my belief a sham. If we don't believe in anything or don't really bother much about what we believe, who or what holds us accountable?

And what we believe matters because faith helps us make sense ... of everything! Faith is the filter through which we pass the crazy jumble of our experience, the filter that allows us to see patterns and movement and purpose. What we believe allows us to remain hopeful in discouraging times, to take courage in daunting times, to take comfort in sorrowful times, and to stay on course in confusing times.

What we believe does matter! So, what would you say? What does our church believe?

Before you answer that, let me clear up two possible misconceptions. The first is that belief is not important to the United Church of Christ. That is simply not true! The United Church of Christ has a long history and deep roots, roots and history shared with much of the rest of the Christian church. The United Church of Christ and its antecedents, specifically Congregationalism, are solidly a part of mainstream orthodox Christianity. What we hold in common, the beliefs we hold in common, with Methodists and Lutherans and Baptists and Presbyterians and Roman Catholics, far outweigh any differences.

Sunday after Sunday, we, along with most other United Church of Christ churches, talk about what we believe and its implications for how we live -- what we believe about creation, what we believe about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, what we believe about God's plan for the future of this universe. If we believed nothing, or if we thought that belief doesn't really matter, the church would quickly disappear, because it would have no real reason to exist. Perhaps that is why some churches are disappearing, because they have lost their faith.

The second and more common misconception is this: that in our church, in the United Church of Christ, you can believe whatever you want. In a literal sense, that's true. Of course, you can believe whatever you want! You can believe whatever you want in any church, United Church of Christ or Southern Baptist or Roman Catholic! But that does not mean that as far as the beliefs of the church as a whole are concerned, anything goes. And it does not mean that we cannot talk about what it is our church believes.

Our particular tradition lends itself to that misconception because in the United Church of Christ we describe faith statements as testimonies to faith, not tests of faith. You don't have to pass a faith test to be a part of our church. Your beliefs don't have to align perfectly with some established standard in order to join us in following Jesus. In the United Church of Christ, we do not believe we have the right or the authority to judge another person's beliefs or to exclude a willing participant from our worship or our work or the communion table. We will not use any statement of faith as a test of faith against which your beliefs are measured.

But we will use and do rely on statements of faith as testimonies to faith, as means of describing what it is that brings us together and holds us together and leads us forward. The second paragraph of the United Church of Christ constitution reads:

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.

We make our faith our own, but the faith we make our own is the faith already lived and expressed by generations of Christians before us, and articulated in their creeds, their statements of faith.

In the back of our hymnal (*The New Century Hymnal*), you will find copies of the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed and the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith. Listen now as we read the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ ...

*We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit,
God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God,
and to your deeds we testify:
You call the worlds into being,
create persons in your own image,
and set before each one the ways of life and death.
You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.
You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared
through prophets and apostles.
In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior,
you have come to us
and shared our common lot
conquering sin and death
and reconciling the world to yourself.
You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.
You call us into your church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be your servants in the service of others,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world
and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.
You promise to all who trust you
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
your presence in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.
Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.
Amen.*

That's the statement of faith of our church, an attempt to express what it is we believe. It is an attempt, a statement, not the final word. But it is a statement of faith, a record of what we believe, and it is a good one at that! I like it!

It is an orthodox and biblical statement, very much in keeping with the beliefs of Christians from the earliest days, but it is also fresh and dynamic, full of action verbs: *call, create, seek, come, conquer, reconcile, bestow*. It describes a God in motion, and it calls us into motion. It doesn't so much say, "This is the way we believe things are," but more so, "This is what we believe is happening! This is where we are going! This is where God is taking us!" The God it describes is not a distant and eternally unchanging God, stiff and frozen, but a God on the move! And the faith it affirms is not static or passive, but engaged and engaging.

It's a good statement of faith! We are going to take a look at the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ this year, Sunday by Sunday, line by line, and talk together about what we believe. We begin today with the first line: *We believe in you, O God ...*

We believe in you, O God.

There is connection, relationship, intimacy. This statement of belief is not analytical and theological, aloof and passive, but personal and involved, active and passionate.

We believe in you. We believe in you.

When we say, *We believe in you*, it is something very different from saying we believe God exists. I believe morel mushrooms exist, but I wouldn't say to a mushroom, *I believe in you!*

Lots and lots of people say they believe in God, by which they mean they believe a god, a supreme being, something big exists, somewhere out there. But when we say, *We believe in you, O God*, we are saying much more. Think of what you mean when you say to your husband or your lawyer or your physician or your friend, *I believe in you*. You mean: *I trust you. I am counting on you. I know you can do what you say you will do.*

We believe in you. We believe in you. We believe in you.

It's a statement we make together. Belief is not private, but shared. Together we testify to what we have seen and heard and know of God. Together we put our trust in God. Together we stake our future on God. Belief is not an end result of a personal quest, but the consequence of shared experience.

When the Israelites saw the great power with which the Lord had defeated the Egyptians, they stood in awe of the Lord, and they had faith in the Lord ...

When they saw! Their priests and philosophers and college professors didn't write books or hold debates or preach sermons helping the people formulate what they believe about God. They saw! They saw the Lord's power. They saw the Lord's grace. They saw the Lord's faithfulness.

And our faith too has its roots in shared experience, in what we see, what we see of God's power, what we see of God's grace, what we see of God's faithfulness, what we see of the beauty God creates. And if we have seen nothing? But we have! Surely we have! Look! Just look!

If someone were to ask you, *What does your church believe?*, I hope you would be able to answer! Our church believes in God, a God who has brought us to where we are and a God we are counting on to lead us into the future he has in mind. *We believe in you, O God.*

This is what our church believes. But, of course, you can believe whatever you want. You can choose whether or not to make this faith your own. You can choose whether or not to embrace the way of the people who put their trust in the Lord. Will you say: *I believe in you ...?*