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Mark 2:13-17

Does What We Believe Matter?

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Mark 2:13-17 New Revised Standard Version

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

 For the last few weeks we have been talking about things that God never said. We looked at some Christian clichés about God, like God wants you happy or God never gives you more than you can handle. We looked at how those clichés can keep you from having a deeper relationship with God. Last week we wondered if what we do matters to God. Jesus challenges us to help the poor, love others, be generous and forgive those who hurt. I heard the spoken-word poet Sarah Kay this week at SMU and she said the tragedies you let into your heart should matter. They should manifest into action because what we do matters to God.

 Today I want us to think about if what we believe matters to God. It is an interesting experience to be a pastor in the United Methodist Church and to have someone tell me, “I love being a Methodist, you can believe anything!” The first time this happened (and it has happened more than once), I was not quite sure how to respond. My mouth was hanging open and I thought of all of the Confirmation classes that I have taught. You don’t teach a 6th grader about the Christian faith by saying that they can believe anything. There are certain things that we do believe.

 As United Methodists we have basic affirmations in common with all Christian communities. We believe in God as a Trinity, three persons in one. We affirm that God is one and indivisible, and God is revealed in three distinct ways. “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” We believe that God creates. God created the universe, and continues to create. God sustains and continues to be active in creation. God loves all of creation and each one of us. God suffers hurting when any aspect of God’s creation hurts. In all violence, abuse, injustice, prejudice, hunger, poverty, or illness, God is suffering in our midst. We believe that God judges and God redeems out of God’s infinite love for each one of us forgiving our own self-destruction and renewing us from within. And God reigns over all creation.[[1]](#footnote-2)

 We believe in Jesus and in Jesus we see God. Clyde Thompson told me once about an activity in the old fellowship hall here at Greenland Hills. There was a large butcher block of blank paper and on one end it said, “Jesus is the Son of God” and on the other end it said “Jesus is a cool guy” or “Atheist” or something like that. Clyde was surprised to realize he was the only one standing under the “Son of God” and to see how many folks were standing at different places. Clyde said that as everyone shared about their own understanding, they all talked about how they believed in the way that Jesus lived his life. They stood for the things that Jesus stood for. In a Christian Church we tell the story of Jesus so that Jesus’ story can be our story.

 In Scripture Jesus is called the Son of God. We say that Jesus was God incarnate, God with flesh on. God was in the world in the person of Jesus. Scripture also calls Jesus the Son of man. Jesus was fully human, a person just like us. He was angry, he wept, he was tired, he was tempted. Scripture calls Jesus the Christ. Now, you may think that Christ is Jesus’ last name, but it is not! Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, which means God’s Anointed One. The early Christians said that Jesus was God’s Anointed One, the Chosen One. The fulfillment of the ancient hope for a king who would restore the nation of Israel to glory and the one to bring salvation to all people.[[2]](#footnote-3)

 Scripture calls Jesus Lord. When someone professes their faith and joins the Christian Church, they are asked this question: “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?” When we call Jesus our Lord, we are saying this is the one to whom we give our devoted allegiance. We don’t have any Lords today, we don’t live in medieval times under the authority of lords and monarchs. We are independent and self-sufficient, but to claim Jesus as Lord means to freely submit our will to Jesus’ will, to say that it is Jesus in charge of this world.

 Scripture calls Jesus Savior, the one through whom God has freed us of our sin and has given us the gift of whole life, eternal life and salvation. We have been reconciled with God through Jesus in ways that we can not fully explain, in the mystery of Jesus’ death on the cross and his victory over sin and death in the resurrection.

So, we believe in God, we believe in Jesus, and we believe in the Holy Spirit. When we sense God leading us, or challenging us, or supporting us or comforting us, that is the Holy Spirit at work.

A preacher was preaching to coal miners in England a long time ago and he asked one man, "What do you believe?" The man said, "Well, I believe the same as the church." The preacher asked, “And what does the church believe?" The man said, "Well, they believe the same as me." The preacher said, "And what is it that you both believe?" The man said, "Well, I suppose the same thing."[[3]](#footnote-4)

 As United Methodists we invite people to experience God’s grace and to grow in their knowledge and love of God through disciplined Christian living. We put faith and love into action, so sometimes we think that belief isn’t important. I remember as a youth making sandwiches at the church and getting in the church vans to drive downtown. And feeling like my beliefs were real now. I felt like I understood Jesus more.

 I remember the first time I led in worship as an SMU Perkins Intern at Oak Lawn UMC. I had to read the leader part in the Call to Worship. I didn’t have to come up with anything on my own, I just had to read what was printed on the paper. But, I was so nervous and I felt like I was going to hyperventilate. And I prayed for the Holy Spirit to be with me and to calm me, and I stood up and my knees stopped shaking and my voice stopped shaking and I believed that the Holy Spirit was real.

 As United Methodists we believe in salvation by grace. Grace is the love and mercy given to us by God because God wants us to have it, not because of anything we have done to earn it. God’s incredible grace flows from God’s great love for us.

In the Scripture that we read this morning from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus says that he came for people like us, sinners. He came for people like you and me who think that we have it all figured out, but we can’t seem to get it right. Jesus loved and accepted everyone, he loved those that were rejected by religion, he loved those who had been hurt by the church and those who struggle with their beliefs. When the religious people said to stone a woman because she was caught in adultery, Jesus said, “Hey, religious people, whoever of you has never sinned, you throw the first stone.” And he looked at the woman and said, “Go and sin no more. You are forgiven.” As people of faith, we have an opportunity to bear a faithful Christian witness to Jesus Christ, the living reality at the center of the Church’s life and witness.[[4]](#footnote-5) This is a journey. Our beliefs matter and we do have certain beliefs as Christians and as United Methodists.

In 1997 there was a movie with Jodie Foster called Contact. Jodie Foster’s character, Ellie, is an astronomer. Another character in the movie is Palmer, a spiritual advisor to the President. So, the astronomer challenges the spiritual advisor to prove that God exists. Ockham’s razor demands that the simplest explanation is the best, so the astronomer says, “What’s more likely? That a mysterious, all-powerful God created the universe, and then decided not to leave a single evidence of their existence? Or that God simply doesn’t exist at all, and that we created God, so that we wouldn’t have to feel so small and lonely?” The spiritual advisor talks about a deeply moving experience that he had where he felt overwhelmed by the presence of God. It is because of that experience that the spiritual advisor believes in God. But the astronomer didn’t have this deeply moving experience so she can’t accept the spiritual advisor’s belief in God. The spiritual advisor asks the astronomer if she loved her father. Yes, the astronomer loved her father deeply, but when the spiritual advisor asks the astronomer to prove the love she has for her father, she can’t.

So, aliens make contact as they do in movies and the aliens send plans to build a time machine. The astronomer offers herself for the mission. The spiritual advisor asks her if she is willing to die for this, and the astronomer says, “For as long as I can remember, I’ve been searching for something, some reason why we’re here. What are we doing here? Who are we? If this is a chance to find out even just a little part of that answer… I don’t know, I think it’s worth a human life. Don’t you?”

So, the astronomer journeys down a wormhole and has an experience where she finds herself on a beach. Someone is walking towards her, it’s her father. But it is really an alien. And her father, who is an alien, says, “You’re an interesting species, an interesting mix. You’re capable of such beautiful dreams and such horrible nightmares. You feel so lost, so cut off, so alone, only you’re not. See, in all our searching, the only thing we’ve found that makes the emptiness bearable is each other.”

The astronomer returns to earth and everyone is as skeptical of her experience as she was of the experience that the spiritual advisor had of God. The astronomer realizes that she had an experience that she can’t prove, she can’t explain. She says, “everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real. I was part of something wonderful, something that changed me forever; a vision of the universe that tells us undeniably how tiny, and insignificant, and how rare and precious we all are. A vision that tells us we belong to something that is greater than ourselves. That we are not, that none of us, are alone. I wish I could share that. I wish that everyone, if even for one moment, could feel that awe, and humility, and the hope, but that continues to be my wish.”

Ours is a faith that reminds us again and again that God comes to us. In creation, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, in Communion and in Baptism, God comes to us. In joy, in beautiful sun shiny days, in the homeless, in the kind person at the grocery store, God comes to us. God is in and among us. God is with us now, meeting us in our brokenness, in our doubt, in our fear and in our anxiety, in our ignorance and in our belief. God is in the midst of it. The author of all life has found us. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. Much of this paragraph taken from <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/our-christian-roots> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Much of this paragraph taken from <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/our-christian-roots> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. http://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/know-what-you-believe [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/basics-of-our-faith [↑](#footnote-ref-5)