

Credo

Sermon text: Romans 8:12-17

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May 31, 2015

I. I believe in God, the Father Almighty

Have you used an old axiom and wondered, “What does this saying really mean?” Think about it – what is the back story to offering advice like: “Never look a gift horse in the mouth?” In the first place, no one has ever given me a horse as gift. And furthermore, I have no idea why I would even think of looking at a horse’s mouth. So when we want to encourage a spirit of gratitude for receiving a gift, why do we say “Never look a gift horse in the mouth?”

So I did a little research and found out that as horses age they continue to grow more teeth. The new teeth that come in the back of the mouth push the older teeth forward, so that someone who knows horses can recognize an older horse because its front teeth project forward. The saying means that we should be appreciative of receiving the gift of a horse and avoid appearing ungrateful by checking its teeth to see if it is an old horse. That’s why we say, “Never look a gift horse in the mouth.”

Similarly, we can sometimes be unaware of the back story and the real meaning for some of the great truths of our Christian faith. Take, for example, *The Apostles’ Creed*. It is series of statements about what we believe as followers of Jesus. We use this affirmation of our faith almost every week in our sanctuary services. The first words we say are: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...”

If we spoke Latin, the very first word we would say would be “Credo.” It means “I believe.” So “Credo” is our theme today since we will be talking about who God is, according to the scriptures. Let’s look back to the Old Testament book of Exodus, chapter 3, verses 13-15:

But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them? God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you...’

This text is part of Moses’ dramatic encounter with God when he was a shepherd in the land of Midian. The Lord gets Moses’ attention and speaks to him from a burning bush. God commissions the shepherd to lead the Israelites out of Pharaoh’s captivity in Egypt and into the Promised Land. But Moses is hesitant to assume the mantle of leadership and asks for God’s name so that he can prove to the people he was truly appointed by the Lord. So God tells him the divine name, “I AM WHO I AM.” And the Lord reminds Moses that he is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob – the patriarchs of Israel. He is the one true God.

There were many cultures and many deities in the ancient world, but the Lord sought out one particular group of people, the Hebrews, to whom he revealed himself. The book of Genesis looks back over history and traces God’s relationship with humankind from creation to the covenant with Abraham. It shows how the Lord was faithful in the lives of Isaac and Jacob, and watched over his covenant people during their long captivity in Egypt. Then God spoke to Moses of his intent to bring the people out of slavery and into freedom in a land of promise.

Throughout this period of early Old Testament history, the Lord is shaping a covenant people who are radically monotheistic in a polytheistic world. In other words, God’s people

believed in one God, with a capital “G”, while the peoples around them assumed there were many different gods. A defining quality of Judaism is that it is monotheistic. The Jews did not say to other people around them, “My god is better than your god.” No. They said, “My God is the one true God and what you worship is no god.”

This shaping process continued as the Israelites conquered the Promised Land under Joshua’s leadership. It was evident during the period of the Judges as the twelve tribes of Israel established themselves in their new land. It was a part of the period the monarchy, especially in the building of the temple in Jerusalem and in the hope for a Messiah from King David’s line. The prophets kept this hope alive before and during the time of the exile. And the Jews continued to look for the Lord’s Messiah after their return from exile.

The Jews believed in God. They thought they knew God – the one true God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses, the God whose Messiah would sit on David’s throne.

II. I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord

Kind of like we think we know the meaning of our wise sayings. How about the axiom, “A stitch in time saves nine?” We understand the gist of what the saying means, right? I hope you do because I’m not sure I do. I’m not much into stitches or sewing, so the wisdom of this saying is pretty much lost on me.

What I found out is that this axiom is about the truth that it is far simpler to repair a small tear in a cloth – with as little as one stitch, as soon as the tear is detected. Rather than delaying action and waiting for the tear to get worse when nine more stitches might be necessary to do it. It means timely effort sooner will prevent having to expend much greater effort later.

Similarly, God’s self-revelation in the Old Testament was just the first part of the story. The Lord patiently cultivated a relationship with his covenant people for two thousand years. The Jews were monotheistic. They expected a Messiah from the line of David. Many of them lived in the geographic area of Palestine, the land of their ancestors. That is why Jesus came when he did. If he had come at some other time in history, in some other place, to some other people, it would not have made sense. But it did make sense that Jesus came as a Jew to the land of Palestine during its occupation by the Roman Empire. It was time for God to reveal more of his identity to humankind.

In *The Apostles’ Creed* we say, “I believe... in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord...” I have heard on a number of occasions, especially from people outside the Christian Church, that Jesus was only a prophet or a fine moral teacher. These folks say that Jesus never claimed he was God. I have heard this assertion at times spoken with great conviction, even apparent erudition. But whoever thinks Jesus never claimed to be God is mistaken. The fact is that there are many passages in the gospels in which Jesus says that he is God. But perhaps nowhere does he stake his claim to divinity more clearly than in John 8.

This passage is significant because it relates back to God’s self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 3. The context is a heated debate with Jewish religious leaders. They are trying to discredit Jesus and accuse him of being a half-breed who is demon possessed. Jesus responds just as forcefully, telling his critics that God is not their father – the devil is! As this disagreement continues, Jesus makes the incredible statement that the patriarch Abraham has seen him. Of course, his opponents attack the absurdity of Jesus’ statement since he is only about thirty years old. How could Abraham, who lived 2000 earlier have seen Jesus? It was nonsense.

And then Jesus responds in verse 58, “Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.” Did you catch that? “Before Abraham was, I am.” He invokes the divine name that God gave to

Moses during their encounter at the burning bush and claims it for himself. Jesus clearly and unequivocally said he was God. And his hearers understood that claim. You can tell by their response to his statement. They pick up stones to stone Jesus to death because they were convinced he spoke blasphemy: he claimed to be God.

This, friends, is a foundational truth of our Christian faith. There are other beliefs that are subject to various interpretations and different understandings, but the divinity of Jesus Christ is not one of them. It is a defining mark of all who claim to be Christian. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord.” Jesus is God’s ultimate self-revelation. Once the Lord shaped the monotheism of the Jewish faith, then he went a step further and revealed the second person of the Trinity – Jesus Christ, God the Son.

III. I believe in the Holy Spirit

So my advice to you this morning is to, “Strike while the iron is hot.” Oops – that’s another one of those old axioms with unclear origins, isn’t it? The image that comes to my mind is doing something violent to my iron while it is plugged in and sitting on the ironing board. I don’t think that’s the correct back story for that saying.

I understand that it means to act decisively to take advantage of opportunities when they arise, but the connection with ironing my clothes doesn’t seem right. It isn’t. With a bit of research I learned that this axiom comes from the blacksmith’s forge. The image is that the blacksmith has to shape the iron when it is red hot and most malleable. Wait too long and the opportunity to create what you intend to create is lost.

Last week on Pentecost we talked about the coming of the third person of the Trinity with power – the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter, the Spirit of the risen Christ. In *The Apostles’ Creed* we say, “I believe in the Holy Ghost” or Holy Spirit. We learned about St. Augustine’s helpful image of the Trinity as the sun – the star at the center of our solar system, as God the Father; the light from the sun that we can see as God the Son, Jesus Christ; and the energy from the sun that brings life and growth to the earth as God the Holy Spirit.

As Christians we look back at the first chapter of Genesis and see God’s Trinitarian nature revealed from the start: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth... A wind from God (the Spirit of God) swept over the face of the water. Then God said (God spoke his Word) ‘Let there be light.’” Seeing God’s Trinity throughout scripture is not something we invented. It is something that’s been there from the very beginning.

As a child, I learned the great stories of the Bible in Sunday school and church. At one point I was even able to recite all the books of the Bible in order from Genesis through Revelation. I initially committed my life to Christ as a third-grader, but it wasn’t until after my freshman year in college that God reached into my life at a time when I needed him most. His Spirit changed me through the words of Jesus Christ in the gospel of Luke. That’s when what I believe about God went from my head to my heart and began to get out into my hands and feet.

How about you? What do you believe about God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit? Believing isn’t just about giving mental assent, as in: “I believe the grass is green.” Real belief, “Credo” belief involves our head, our heart, our hands and our feet. Your belief, your “Credo” is what you live by every day. Friend, do you believe? Let us pray.