

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
Sunday, March 11, 2012  
Roland P. Perdue, Interim Pastor

**“Quick, Tell Me!”**

John 3:16-17; I Corinthians 2:1-5

The telephone rang. I recognized the voice. She asked, “Quick, Roland, tell me. What do I believe?”

She was at a cocktail party. The guests were a mixed group: assorted Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, agnostics, and a large percentage of Jehovah's Bystanders. And someone had asked her, "What do you Presbyterians believe, anyway?"

The question must have surprised her. At least it disturbed her. "Quick, Roland. What do I believe?"

I bit my tongue and avoided saying, "Well, if you don't know, you probably ..." Instead, I said, "That's a big question. We need a lot of time to discuss it. I mean, where would we start? We could talk about the doctrines found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the implications of the Apostles' Creed, our denomination's views on social issues, the biblical theology of the Old ..."

"Look," she cut me off, "I don't have time for any of that stuff. I'm at a party. Just tell me what I believe."

I can't tell you how very much I dislike those "on-demand" conversations. I am not an "On-Demand Answer Channel" on her TV. "I'm sorry," I said, "I won't even try to answer your question on the telephone. It's too important a question not to give it adequate time. Most of us spend a life-time answering your question. When you really want to deal with it, give me a call and we'll make an appointment."

"But what do I tell them tonight?" she asked.

"Oh," I replied, "just be honest and tell them you don't really know what you believe."

"I can't do that!" she replied. "They all know I go to First Church." I did not know what that had to do with anything. But it must have had something to do with it, for she said it with such conviction. I am sorry, but I did not get it. I still don't. Please, if you do, clue me in later.

At any rate, as I waited on sleep to sweep over me later, I began to ask myself, "What do I really believe? When all is said and done, when it is all boiled down, what is the core of my faith? As a Presbyterian, I can rattle off what Calvin thought important: the faithfulness of God's sovereignty born out in the critical and central importance of Christ as witnessed to in

the scriptures and celebrated in the sacraments of the church. But when I face the deep mysteries of my life, what do I really believe? In other words, what do I bet my life on?

So, this morning, I want to say a little about who I really believe. Simply put, **I believe in Jesus Christ.**

It has always been easy for me to believe that a force beyond us is the source behind our universe. I have often found it difficult, however, to have a sense of the personal presence of that power. And I have found it all but impossible to believe that a force, a power, could care for me. I remember a seminary classmate talking about theologian Paul Tillich's conception of God as "the Ultimate Concern." And the big question back in those days was, "Is God your Ultimate Concern?" My classmate never tired of saying, "I don't care if God is the 'Ultimate Concern' or not, but I sure hope God is ultimately concerned about me!" And that gets at it for me. I do not need a cold or impersonal manifestation of the Ultimate.

I do need, and desperately at most times, to know that the Ultimate is ultimately concerned about me! I need to be cared for at the core of my being. And when I say I "believe" in Jesus, I am using the word "believe" in the sense that the very helpful Marcus Borge uses the word. He suggests that before the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the verb "believe" meant "belove" and the object of "believe" was almost always a person. I "belove" Jesus is to admit that I am "not a fan, but a follower" of him because in and through following him, I sense God's faithful caring. I do not so much believe a list of things about Jesus as I love him, find genuine joy in following him and experience a sense of completeness when I do.

Jesus is not a system of belief as he is a person to be and to become with as I live. Jesus is, for me, the living embodiment of God's presence in my life; he is the assurance of a demanding love to all humankind, including you and me. When I wonder and worry about what God thinks of me, of you, of us, I look at and listen to Jesus and I know, or at least catch profound glimmers.

The deep problem of religious life is not intellectual belief or lack of belief in the reality of God. The real sandy grit in the vinegar bowl of faith is our difficulty sensing God's personal presence, God's ultimate concern for me, for you, for the universe created by God and endangered by us.

W.H. Auden's poem "For the Time Being" reminds us what it is like to be gripped by a terrible loneliness in an impersonal world:

Alone, alone, about a dreadful wood  
Of conscious evil runs a lost mankind,  
Dreading to find its Father lest it find  
The Goodness it has dreaded is not good:  
Alone, alone, about our dreadful wood...  
Where is that Law for which we broke our own,  
Where now the Justice for which Flesh resigned  
Her hereditary right to passion ....  
The Pilgrim Way has led to the Abyss...

We who must die demand a miracle...  
Nothing can save us that is possible:  
We who must die demand a miracle.

Or hear the utter simplicity and yet profound questioning hopes expressed in a lyric from singer Leonard Cohen:

Show me the place where you want your slave to go  
Show me the place I've forgotten I don't know  
Show me the place for my head is bending low  
Show me the place where you want your slave to go

Show me the place help me roll away the stone  
Show me the place I can't move this thing alone  
Show me the place where the Word became a man  
Show me the place where the suffering began

Into this desperate, hurting reality comes the miracle of God's concern for us made personal, made incarnate in flesh and blood, made skin and bones, made real. When God, the Ultimate Being, relates to me it is in a human being that is the chosen means of God's message. In this sense, the medium is indeed the message. God becomes flesh and blood in Jesus. And Jesus, a Jew who taught and loved and died and whose essence and spirit lives still, is God's ultimate message to me, to us. Jesus is *The* Person who became *A* Person for the sake of *All* Persons and who demonstrates what it means to be human and how we can act humanely in the midst of this confusing world. Into the Abyss the merciful miracle of God's love has become "flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone."

And when I get all self-centered and wonder and worry about what God thinks of me, of you, of us, I look at and listen to Jesus Christ and I catch glimmers of how I am valued. Then I can move from myself to concern for others. Thus I can cut free from self-bondage and captivity. In the words of the hymn Martin Luther King quoted, "Thank God, I am free. Thank God Almighty, I am free at last."

This is why Paul can say that he wants to know nothing and preach nothing "except Jesus Christ and him crucified." That is how much God cares, that is God's ultimate concern for us. And that is why John's gospel tells us that God loved this world so much, so deeply, that God intends for all to "belove" Jesus and live into our image as God's children. And the entirety of the New Testament wants us to engage in making it possible for that news to be broadcast so that all for people will sense themselves affirmed by God as of value and worth.

I was walking with a friend I hope to walk with again someday. We were talking about his daughter. He was telling me about the various difficulties he and his wife were having with her and her growing dependency upon drugs. I said something that sounded like good advice, but which was really stupid. I said, "George, you have got to get some distance from her. You have to be a bit more objective about her, about the whole situation." Now, I am convinced I was right. And I am also convinced he was right when, with some heat, he responded, "My God,

Roland, I can't be objective about her. She's my daughter! I care what happens to her! I can't be objective, distant, I care!"

When your adult child gets into difficulty of some sort; financial, job related, major illness – whatever and calls asking for help, don't you know exactly what you should do? You should say, "I am sorry, but you have to live with the consequences of bad choices. It's called "tough love." And it is the proper course of action to take to help the child learn to be dependent and responsible. Right?

Well, I fail every time. I can't do it. I have spent my life trying to fix things. I know better. I know there are some things that cannot be fixed. But, knowing better, I send the money.

Now if I and maybe you care in such stuff, how much more does God care for us. And while we pay for the consequences of our choices, God still comes to us in Christ with care, compassion and concern. God's caring for us is expressed in Jesus, for Christ is an indication of God's strong determination not to be distant. Jesus, whose essence and Spirit permeate the church today, is alive in our midst expressing God's care, God's caring, God's active and aggressive refusal to be distant from us. I believe Jesus Christ as the living embodiment of God's pervasive presence in my life.

I want to jump back for a moment to one of the lines of Leonard Cohen's song *Show me the Place*. It's the line that goes "Show me the place where the suffering began." If I believe Jesus, I will follow him to those places where the suffering still goes on and on. I will sympathize with those for whom atheism seems the only possible response to human suffering on such a grand scale. And I will understand those who flirt with agnosticism. And if I believe Jesus, I will also and always seek to be available and aware of the multitude of ways in which human suffering takes place: in fine homes as well as in mean shacks and modest dwellings, in homeless shelters and the country clubs, in military barracks and prisons, in late night bars and dirty hotels. And I will do my best to make certain Jesus could, at least, recognize what's going on in a church if he stopped by one Sunday morning or Wednesday. God cares and is there where we suffer with one another.

Fred Craddock, a former professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia tells this story. It, or something like it, has probably happened to you. A family was out for a drive one Sunday afternoon. The day was pleasant and relaxed. Suddenly, the two children in the back seat begin to beat their father on the shoulder. "Daddy, Daddy, stop the car! Stop the car! There's a kitten back there on the side of the road." The father says, "So there's a kitten on the side of the road. We're out for a drive."

"But, Daddy, you have to stop and pick it up."

"I *don't have* to stop and pick it up."

"But, Daddy, if you don't it will die."

“Well, then, it will have to die. We don't have room for another animal. We have a zoo already at the house. No more animals.”

“But, Daddy, you can't just let it die?”

“You don't think so? Be quiet. We're out for a relaxing drive.”

“We never thought our Daddy would be so mean and cruel as to let a little kitten die”

The kids are getting through, and now mother joins in. She says, “Dear, you're just going to have to stop.” He turns the car around and returns to the spot where the kitten still is cleaning her face. And he pulls the car off the road. He goes out to pick up the kitten. The poor creature turns out to be just skin and bones, sore-eyed, and full of fleas. But, when he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of energy the kitten bristles, showing his teeth and claws. Hsssst! With deep scratches all over his hand, he picks up the kitten by the loose skin on the back of his neck, brings it over to the car and says, “Don't touch it. It's probably got leprosy.”

Back home, the kids give the kitten a bath, feed it warm milk, and beg, “Can we let it stay in the house just for tonight?” The father says “Sure, take my bedroom; the whole house is already a zoo.”

They make a bed fit for a princess. Weeks pass. Then one day the father walks in, feels something rub against his leg, looks down, and there is a cat. He reaches down toward the animal carefully, looking over his shoulder to see that no one is watching. When the cat sees that hand, it does not show its claw and hiss, but arches it back to receive a caress. Is that the same cat? No. It's not the same as the suspicious, hurt, hissing kitten on the side of the road. Of course not. And you know as well as I what makes the difference.

That is what I believe. And I bet my life that I am right! God has come into our world, keeps coming into our dreadful world, and reaches down in Jesus Christ to give us hope and love. And God's hand is covered with scratches!

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. And that is why I love Jesus.

AMEN.