

## Sundays after Pentecost [Proper 21A]

September 27, 2020

Haven Evangelical Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2: 1-13; Matthew 21: 23-32

*Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen*

Those who are reading Becoming a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church and those going to hear the author speak are being royally challenged. Those who have no church affiliation — an estimated 30 percent in Hagerstown — are making it very clear that they are not interested in creeds, worship that leaves them cold or churches that act like a club they should be honored to join. We are learning that the “none’s” (those who have no church affiliation) and the “done’s” (those who have walked away from churches for a variety of reasons) aren’t the least bit attracted to religion that is all in the head — right doctrine, right rituals, right denomination. If we are to fulfill our mission to share the gospel with these children of God who are our neighbors, we will need to provide avenues for *experiencing* the presence, love and acceptance of God, not just words and traditions that WE think sum it up nicely.

Then I stumbled on a recording of a presentation of Diana Butler Bass, a scholar who specializes in American religion and culture. I had originally heard her talk at the 2011 Festival of Homiletic in Minneapolis and shared with you at the time some of what I had learned. Nine years later, a story she told dovetailed right into Becoming a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church and our gospel reading.

Diana Butler Bass was reading her daughter’s confirmation class schedule. Bass’s daughter was nearly hyperventilating pointing at the last class date before their actual confirmation service, and it said, “FINAL EXAM: the Creeds and the Ten Commandments.” Her daughter was panicked, “Mom, Mom what if I don’t pass..... Will I go to hell?” She was serious. Her mother, a church historian, professor and author thought — “Is this what we are communicating to our children and to the rest of the populace: Understand the creeds and Ten Commandments or you can’t call yourself a Christian, you can’t be a member of the church and you just may be on your way to hell?”

Bass took the matter to the Director of Youth Education at her church. He asked her if she had a better idea. Bass said she had just finished a new study of the Nicene Creed and before the words were out of her mouth, the Director said, “Well, than you teach them that day.” And so she did, with her daughter’s admonition, “Don’t embarrass me, Mom!”

Bass started by telling them that usually the creed is taught line by line with lots of explanation but she was only going to talk about two words — WE BELIEVE. They thought that was pretty good – two words rather than the 221 words of the creed. She asked them what it means to believe and here were some of the answers she got:

*“Believing is about something that might be true but no one is really sure about it.”*

*“It’s like a fairy tale — It’s something you hold on to that couldn’t be true but it’s good for you.”*

She saw the parents sitting in the back of the room tilting and nodding their heads.

Bass went on to explain that two Latin words are typically translated as “believe” : *opinari* and *credo*. *Opinari* means “I am of the opinion that...,” I intellectually concur. I believe, I am of the opinion that, local, fresh summer tomatoes are far superior in taste to those we get in the grocery store the rest of the year.” But that was not the word the church fathers used when they wrote the creeds. The word they used was *credo*, which means “I trust... I am devoted to.... I give my heart to...” So listen to that difference as it would sound in the Nicene Creed. With the incorrect *Opinari* ---- “I am of the opinion that there is one God, the Father, the Almighty, who made heaven and earth, all that is, seen and unseen.” With the intended *credo*: “We are devoted to, we give our hearts to one God, the Father, the Almighty, who made heaven and earth, all that is, seen and unseen.”

What’s the difference? “Those credo words not about knowing everything they are about your heart.” So they read aloud the Nicene Creed with those credo words in place — like I’m going to ask you to do right now — It’s on the salmon-orange insert in your bulletin. (*Wait for everyone to find the paper and read.... “I give my heart to.....”*) When that class finished the creed and said “Amen,” one of the parents in the back of the room cried out, “It’s a prayer! It’s a prayer! I never knew that!”<sup>1</sup> The creed isn’t a systematic checklist of the things with which Christians must be able to theologically explain or philosophically agree point by point in order to be saved or in the church. It’s an expression of trust. Using the description of God developed by our church fathers, our creeds are intended to announce to **whom** we give our hearts, to whom we are devoted. To believe in God is not just something you do with your head and your mouth. Believing in God is about your heart and how you live your life. Our actions and choices follow the lead of our hearts.

Jesus was talking to the church folks and leaders in Jerusalem — those who considered themselves to be the card-carrying, faithful believers who regularly worshiped

and gave money and who followed the church traditions and rules. To them he told a parable about a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” Showing great disrespect, the son publicly refused but later changed his mind and did what his father asked. The father went to his second son and asked the same. That son answered, “I go, sir” but he did not go. Jesus asked which of the two did the will of the Father? Now those good church folk were caught. Neither son had acted rightly — one gave his father lip and the other gave him lip service. But Jesus didn’t ask who act perfectly right. Jesus asked who did the father’s will. He asked, whose love for the Father was expressed with the action of their lives, not just the words of their mouth?

Jesus was trying to break through to the leaders and member of his Hebrew faith about that difference between *opinari* and *credo belief*. Faithfulness to God is not only what you say, but much more about what your believing heart leads you to do. It’s not just talking the talk, making statements *about* God that sound good and going along with church rituals and rules. Faithfulness and believing is about walking the talk, loving God with our whole hearts, minds, souls and strength and so, behaving in ways that show God’s love at work in us. The difference between saying we are Christian and living like we love Jesus is like the difference between only reading the notes on a page and actually singing the song.”<sup>2</sup> There is much more joy in loving our neighbor in God’s vineyard than there is in simply knowing you’re suppose to.

As we listen to this parable some two thousand years after it’s first telling, Jesus continues his efforts to break through to us who may have gotten really comfortable in thinking that all there is to this faith thing is saying we believe and merely going through motions — the very way of being church that has NO attraction to a none or done. After his resurrection Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” He did not ask, “Do you understand me and everything I taught?” Jesus asks us, “Do you love me?” It’s not a Hallmark, sentimental question. It’s a life shaking and life shaping question because the answer that will make any difference is not merely an intellectual, “I love Jesus” but a heart-deep “I love YOU, Jesus” that opens one’s self to a trusting, transforming relationship with a living God who first and forever loves us.

Do we, do you, do I love Jesus? The answer to that question is what our Lord wants to know. It's not a question on a final exam to determine if we get into heaven. Jesus took that test and passed on our behalf. But the answer to that question has always been what matters most to God. "I love you, Jesus" is the foundation of any other authentic, Christian *credo* because it's not only about saying the words but living the love and following Jesus when the Lord asks, "Will you go into my vineyard?" A Christian church in any century is not about being an institution with a building & membership rolls, but being a people who share the love and joy we experience while we live, work, help and play with our neighbors in God's vast vineyard. It is not the head but the heart of Christ in us that will speak most powerfully, more genuinely, more meaningfully to those who haven't met Jesus and heard the good news. *That* is how to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century church. Amen

Linda M Alessandri

#### ENDNOTES

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1. Adapted from a lecture by Diana Butler Bass delivered at the 2011 Festival of Homiletics conference sponsored by Lectionary homiletics in Minneapolis MN
  2. Brett Younger, source unrecorded