

“In Life and In Death”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 16, 2018

First Scripture Lesson: Romans 8:35, 37-39

³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Second Scripture Lesson: Romans 14:7-9

⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.



Sermon: *In Life and In Death*

What do you believe?

Do you believe in the righteousness of democracy and capitalism? Do you believe that Climate Change is real and that human beings have a role in it? Do you believe, as Anne Frank did, that “in spite of everything... people are really good at heart?”¹ Or do you believe as John Calvin did that human nature is and always has been utterly corrupted by sin?”²

If you ask people what they believe, you're likely to get some interesting answers. Some folks might tell you about their faith. Some will tell you about their political leanings. Some might actually surprise you with some answers you weren't expecting. For instance, a recent poll by Forbes Magazine found that 4% of their respondents believe, in spite of every bit of evidence to the contrary, that the world is flat³ and another poll taken by Gallup several years ago showed that 6% of Americans believe that the moon landings were faked.⁴ There are people who believe that professional wrestling is real, that the pyramids were built by aliens, and that people can use ESP to read minds.

But what we believe, what we truly believe, is something that resides deep within us and that inspires the way that we live our lives.

My sister believes that “every little bit helps.” In the interest of generating as little trash and pollution as possible, she has adopted the practice of not using plastic straws. So, when she eats out at restaurants, she will kindly ask that the server not include a straw in her drink. It's a small thing, but someone once said “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has,” and she believes that. So, she recycles, uses a refillable water bottle, and takes her own reusable shopping bags to the store when she buys groceries.

But it was interesting watching her debate with my nephew when we were all together recently. You see, he is skeptical of such things. He doesn't seem to think that small things matter. He questioned how something so small as a drinking straw could make any difference. So, he continues to use single use plastics and he doesn't recycle them. That's not to say he's a bad person, it just shows the difference in how what you believe affects the way that you live.

If you believe people are inherently good and well-meaning, you'll probably have a different approach to the world than if you believe most people are just out for themselves. If you believe you are a talented, capable person, you will probably embrace the world a little differently than if you don't.

So, what do you believe?

What we believe is very much a product of our experiences and what we have learned and internalized over years. Leslie Weatherhead was a well-known Methodist minister and author who pastored the City Temple church in London for over 20 years. In one of his books he wrote this about belief:

"When people said to me, 'I should like to be a member of the City Temple, what must I believe?' I used to say, 'Only those things which appear to you to be true. These may increase or decrease as your discipleship deepens, but only loyalty to the truth as it authenticates itself in your mind is asked from you. For one thing, believing theological dogmas was not Christ's test of those who sought to be his disciples, and for another very important and fundamental fact, you cannot believe a thing because you are told to believe it ... You can assent (agree), because you are afraid, or want to please, or haven't the energy or skill to think a thing out, but ... When I really believe a thing, I mean that its truth possesses me. "The penny drops," as we say! I do not have truth imposed upon me. I don't impose it on myself. Truth is self-authenticating, and when it possesses me, nothing can shake it from its enthronement until some greater truth displaces it or gives it less prominence."⁵

You see, no one can *make* you believe something, not even you. You can certainly be *convinced*. But being convinced of some new truth is not the same as making a conscious decision to believe something. Belief results from your own experience of the preponderance of the evidence; having that roll around in your brain for a while, and then settle on your heart, resulting in a *realization* that you believe it ... but not a *decision* to believe it.

So, what do you believe?

Most of us are still believers in process. Oh, we profess our faith. We believe in God, and in Jesus and in God's love and in our responsibility to follow Jesus' teachings. But there are a lot of things that the Bible doesn't address or at least not in any adequate way. So, we study, read, pray, discuss, and ask questions. A lot of questions. But our faith lives usually have a few holes that we struggle to fill. But that's okay, because faith doesn't always answer every question. And there is plenty of room for doubt. Renowned Presbyterian Pastor Frederick Buechner says, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."⁶

I guess if there wasn't at least a little doubt, we wouldn't talk about faith, we'd talk about certainty. So, we believe what we believe and for the rest, we seek, and search, and struggle to understand. That is part of the walk of faith. But not all Christians are as comfortable with that, I guess.

I remember a friend of mine telling me of his experience at a large mega-church located near where we used to live in Clemson. He said that he was given a card on which he was to answer two questions: First, “On a scale of 1-10, how confident are you that if you died today you would go to heaven?” and second, “Will you tithe 10% of your income to the church?” He said he answered “9” on the first question and “yes” on the second... and he was turned down for membership. Why? Because the church leadership demanded that he must believe without doubt if he was to be a member, and anything less than “10” was simply unacceptable.

What do you believe?

We Presbyterians have always found it necessary to state what we believe in times of crisis and change and uncertainty. Our constitution includes a Book of Confessions that contains 12 such statements of faith composed at different points in the church’s history; times that were characterized by crisis or change or uncertainty.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen was written by German pastors in 1934 to state clearly what the church believed over and against the rise of Hitler’s National Socialist movement in Germany.⁷ *The Confession of 1967* was set down during the height of the Civil Rights movement and in the midst of the turbulence of the 1960s.⁸ *The Confession of Belhar* was composed by the South African Church during the period of apartheid.⁹ And *The Brief Statement of Faith* was composed by leaders of the old Southern and Northern Presbyterian Churches on the occasion of their reunification in 1983.¹⁰

So, it is when we face difficult circumstances - when the world seems confusing and scary; it is these times that we ground ourselves in our faith by saying what it is that we believe in the face of that crisis, change and uncertainty.

The last few weeks have been difficult for me personally as they have been for my family. My father’s illness was hard. His death was sudden, given the fact that he seemed to be improving, but perhaps not so surprising given the uphill battle he was facing. My sons have lost their grandfather, Mary has lost an important ally in the family, my mother has lost her husband of 53 years. I have lost the man who was my coach, teacher, hero, friend, and best man at my wedding.

And today, my childhood home in South Carolina is threatened by storm and wind and water. My mother evacuated on Monday and she is safe. But we don’t know what has happened to the house. And all of that together; the timing of it, is pretty overwhelming.

In the face of fearsome things, it can be easy to give-in to despair. But it is also the best time to remember what it is that we believe; to call upon the faith that sustains us. When the diagnosis is not good. When the course of treatment is hard. When the loss is profound. When the future is uncertain. When the next step seems too difficult to take. In the face of the storms, both literal and metaphorical, I am comforted by this truth that I believe: That in life and in death, we belong to God.

That is the opening line of that *Brief Statement of Faith* that the Presbyterian Church composed on the occasion of its reunification in 1983. For five years a committee worked on the language and then a second committee checked their work before that new Statement of Faith was approved by the General Assembly and then ratified by the Presbyteries. But I didn’t need all of that process and all of those experts to tell me something I’ve always known. It’s there in the story of our faith. From the very beginning we are shown that all that is has been made by God, including us. And the story of God’s relationship with God’s people

is one of a God who loves and nurtures and looks after a people who have done nothing to deserve it. In the Gospels we learn of God's love, so deep and so wide that God came among us to save us from the worst of our instincts. And Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that the things we fear most in the world pale in comparison to the strength of God's grace and, mercy, and steadfast love.

The fact we believe does not exempt us from crisis and change and uncertainty. But it does ground us during those times, reminding us of God's love for us and of the fact that God is in control, no matter how out of control things may appear. And, that when all is said and done, God is always holding us close. Yes, we may have to endure some pretty difficult things and we may have to face some frightening situations. God has never promised that life will be easy for the disciple. In fact, Jesus said over and over that it would likely be pretty hard.

But our faith is the rock on which we stand. And we know that, in the words of the Psalmist, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."¹¹ The night may seem ever so dark, but because of the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God, we know that the dawn will always come. You can't hold back the dawn.

In life and in death, we belong to God. That's what I believe. And it sustains me.

What do you believe?

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler. Translated by Susan Massotty, Anchorbooks, 1991, Entry Dated Saturday, July 15, 1944, pg. 333

² Rose, Ben Lacy. *T.U.L.I.P.: The Five Disputed Points of Calvinism*. Providence House Publishers, 1996, p. 2.

³ Nace, Trevor. "Only Two-Thirds of American Millennials Believe the Earth Is Round." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 4 Apr. 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2018/04/04/only-two-thirds-of-american-millennials-believe-the-earth-is-round/#6790efb47ec6.

⁴ Newport, Frank. "Landing a Man on the Moon: The Public's View." *Gallup.com*, Gallup, Inc., 20 July 1999, news.gallup.com/poll/3712/landing-man-moon-publics-view.aspx.

⁵ Weatherhead, Leslie D. *The Christian Agnostic*. Abingdon Press, 1965, pp. 30-31

⁶ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. Harper & Row, 1973.

⁷ *Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I*. Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2016, p. 280.

⁸ *Book of Confessions*, p. 286

⁹ *Book of Confessions*, p. 300

¹⁰ *Book of Confessions*, p. 308

¹¹ Psalm 30:5b, NRSV