

God Creates

Genesis 1:1-5, 26-7, 31

What are your own most important and cherished beliefs, the ones that support your life and keep you going? What are the beliefs that make your lives larger, more loving, joyful and free? Our Lenten theme this year is: “Beliefs that Undergird Life: Shaping Your Personal Credo”, or “I Believe”.

Our beliefs can provide a scaffolding for our faith. Some of our beliefs change through the years if ours is a living faith. Emily Dickinson, in a letter to a friend wrote:

...we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps
Believing nimble.¹

I think we all need a nimble faith.

What are those beliefs which feel like bed-rock beliefs to you? What are the beliefs you have jettisoned along the way because they no longer bring life and support your life? One theologian calls this “faithful disbelief.”²

To shape one’s personal credo is more than an intellectual pursuit. In his book entitled *Credo*, William Sloane Coffin wrote:

Credo—I believe—best translates, “I have given my heart to”

This season we are pondering the beliefs that are as deep as our hearts. Body, mind and spirit are all involved in the beliefs that matter. These are the things we need to believe for the living of our lives.

I

Today we reflect on the belief in God as Creator. We are using the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith this season as the launching pad as we explore our own personal beliefs, not as the destination. Your Credo may look very different. On God the Creator the Statement of Faith says:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each the ways of life and death.

On Ash Wednesday I talked about Jesus’ creed, the *Shema*, the “Hear O Israel.” It ends with a theological exclamation: God is *Echad*, One. There are not many gods in the heavens vying for control of your life and control of the world. There is one God, and if God is One, then the universe is one, truly a *uni*-verse, and truth is one, and we, however fragmented we may feel someday, we are one too. Our lives find their oneness in God.

So today as we ponder the meaning of God the Creator, let’s see where it leads us in shaping our personal Credo.

II

I begin with the first creation story in Genesis 1, our text for today.

God spoke the world into being, “called the worlds into being”. Creation comes, as Sue likes to say, from the Imagination of God. The world came from the Mind of the Maker.

Creation, Genesis says, is the purposeful act of a good God. It is no random collision of blind molecules, it has coherence and meaning. The universe contains contingency and chance, but at its heart there is a divine coherence and a divine purpose.

And God called the creation *good*. All of it, all of us. Some believe the world God made is not good but evil and that salvation, then, is the escape from this world. There are some who believe that life is a cosmic battle between good and evil and that the world is divided between the children of darkness and the children of light. Some see the Devil everywhere, as if the Devil were equal to God.

To say that the universe is the purposeful act of a good God which God blessed and called good is part of the scaffolding that helps me live the life I want to live.

The ancient Nicene Creed says,

We believe in one God...maker of heaven and earth and all that is seen and unseen.

So, the material world and the spiritual realm are both the good creation of God. The first great heresy addressed by the church was called Marcionism. It believed that the material world was an evil world created by an underling god. Only the spiritual realm was good and holy. In response, the early creeds said that the material and the spiritual realms are both the good creation of God.

Marxism believes (yes, Marxism is a belief system) that the material world is all there is and that history is endless class warfare. *Dialectical materialism* is what they call this belief. In our capitalist consumerist American society, many live as if the material world is all there is and that therefore the purpose of life is in the accumulation of stuff.

But God is the maker of all that is material and spiritual. Everything is holy—unless we desecrate it with our own human hands.

One more thing about God, the Creator. Creation is ongoing, and we can be partners in the ongoingness of creation. Creation is not a clock God has built, wound up and then stepped away from. God is at work finishing creation and invites us to be part of it. Some have called this the “Eighth Day of Creation”.

III

Now let's talk about us, the human creature. We begin here: God is God, and we are not! God is the Creator and we are the creature, finite human beings. God is the one in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). We are not "the measure of all things."

The second important thing is to be reminded that God made us and God called us good, not just good but *very* good, exceedingly good (Genesis 1:31).

Christian doctrine from Augustine on has emphasized "original sin". One of the five points of Calvinism is "Total Human Depravity", and all this to the degree that it is easy to lose sight of the created goodness of humankind.

So for me in my evolving Credo it has been important to affirm that the world began in Original Blessing, to use Matthew Fox's words, that I and we all were created in the goodness of God, God's Beloved.

Verses 26-7 say even more: that we were created in the image of God, male and female in the image of God. Divine image partakes of male and female, masculine and feminine, because God's being participates in both. The 19th century Shaker community used this verse to affirm the absolute equality of men and women as the basis of their communal life. The leadership circle of the community was made up of equal numbers of men and women. If the community

grew so small as to have all men it dissolved. Most of the church has been running to catch up to this vision given 3,000 years ago in Genesis.

What does this mean to be born in the divine image? It of course doesn't mean we look like God, though many through the centuries have pictured God as a white male ruler and built their theology on that. The *image dei*, or image of God doesn't have to do with one part of us, like the mind.

It has to do with the *character* of God. The theologian Daniel Day Williams, my beloved teacher, said that the image of God in us is "our capacity for communion." "Love", then, he wrote, "is the meaning of the *imago dei*."³ We were made to live in communion—with God and with one another.

One of the most important dimensions of this belief is that it gives dignity to every human person. So we treat every person with this divine dignity. This belief has stirred Hebrew and Christian people throughout the years to social action that preserves and promotes the dignity of all persons. There's a story about a rabbi that when he saw a person approaching, he would say, "Make way, Make way for the image of God." Would that more lived this belief.

The Masai Creed of East Africa says:

We believe in the one High God who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it.... God loves the world *and every nation and tribe* in it.

IV

Now comes the last part of the statement of faith. It is bracing and blunt:

...and set before each [of us] the ways of life and death.

There it is, as real as life and death. God has created us, blessed us and called us good. But, but, God has also set us free to choose the good or to choose what is evil, to choose life or death. As Deuteronomy says, God speaking:

...I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live (Deuteronomy 30:14).

The Jewish faith affirms that we are born in the goodness of God, created in the divine image. But it also teaches that each of us has within a *yetzer hara*, an evil impulse, and a *yetzer hatov*, a good impulse, and that every day we choose to follow one or the other. That seems right to my experience. It's what Lincoln was talking about when he hoped that the "better angels" of our nature might prevail in our nation.

Everyday we have the choice. Which will prevail, the *yetzer hara*, or the *yetzer hatov*? The old story is told, you have perhaps heard it, with a vivid moral

lesson. A man in Alaska had two dogs, one white, the other black. On Saturdays he would take them to town and have them fight one another so the men could bet on the winner. Sometimes the black dog won, other times the white dog won. But the owner, he won every time. Someone asked him, How do you know which one will win? He said, "It's the one I feed."

From the middle of the 19th century, just before the Civil War, came this hymn by James Lovell:

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side.

Some days it is not easy to take the side of truth and the good, especially when we feel like we are in such a minority. But truth and the good are not determined by majority vote. We keep on anyway. As the hymn goes on to say,

Then it is the brave man chooses
While the coward stands aside,
Till the multitude makes virtue
Of the faith they had denied.

V

What's been going on in your heart and mind as we've pondered what we believe about God and about humanity? Somedays believing is easy for me, maybe too easy, other days it is much harder. Sometimes believing is like a gift with ribbons and bows, other times it is a matter of deliberate choice.

I was at a clergy breakfast a few years back with Eli Wiesel speaking, he, the Holocaust survivor who was in the concentration camps when his family was slaughtered, he now a Nobel Peace Prize recipient and fierce champion for what is good. He said words I will always remember. "I have my reasons not to believe in God, I have my reasons not to believe in humanity. I choose not to use them."

What do you believe this day? What do you want to believe? What do you choose to believe?

1. From Lauren F. Winner, *Still* (N.Y.: HarperOne, 2012), p. 166.
2. Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. 3
3. Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (N.Y.: Harper Row, 1968), pp. 130-38.

