

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a forty day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter, excluding Sundays. It is a time of self-examination, self-reflection, repentance and spiritual growth for Christians. As Christians we need to pause every now and then to listen to God and to assess our personal relationship with Him. During Lent this year, I want us to focus on the following questions: "What do I believe? Do I believe in the Resurrection? Do I believe in Jesus Christ?" If we are going to grow closer to the Lord and truly experience His presence in our daily lives, then we need to be certain about what we believe.

Now the love of God and the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ on our behalf are so amazing that at times we may have some doubts and uncertainties about what we truly believe. And that is okay. This also happened to the disciples; at times they had trouble fully grasping what Jesus was saying and what He was doing. This morning let's look at one of these times when the disciples had trouble understanding Jesus which is recorded in the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, the first fourteen verses. Please turn to this passage in your personal Bibles or you can follow along on Page 102 in the New Testament of the Pew Bibles.

Read John 14:1-14

It was "sharing time" in a kindergarten class full of bright young children. The teacher was leading a discussion about the children's mothers and fathers. One child said: "Well, my mother is Catholic and my father is Jewish." "Oh, wow," said another child. "So what do you believe?" "Oh, I believe in everything!" said the child. "What do you mean everything?" asked the teacher. "Well, you know," replied the child, "Jesus Christ, Moses, Snow White, Easter Bunny, Tooth Fairy, everything." Does this sum up our beliefs?

In the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in John 11 that Jana/John read to us earlier, Jesus told Lazarus' sister Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Then Jesus asked Martha the most important question in her life: "Do you believe this?" In other words, do you believe in Me? This is also one of the most important questions in our lives: "Do you believe in Jesus? What do you believe?" This is a question that we must each answer for ourselves: it must be a personal belief and not based on the opinions of others. Borrowed beliefs have no power. Mark Twain said: "In religion and politics, people's beliefs and convictions are almost in every case gotten second hand and without examination." As I said earlier, it's okay to have doubts and questions about our religious beliefs. It is only through questioning these basic beliefs that we develop our own personal beliefs.

Saint Augustine said: "unless you believe, you will not understand." Christians in the Middle Ages used the phrase "I believe in order to understand" to explain that belief is God's gift to

help us understand what cannot be grasped by analytical thinking. Reason and common sense can only take us so far before trust must take over. We can read all the books ever written analyzing God, Jesus Christ, and the Resurrection, but at some point we have to step out in faith. God gives us enough analytical proof to show there is a reason to believe but not so much that faith is not required. Our belief in eternal life is not based on some wishful thinking to calm our human fears about dying, but on our belief in Jesus' promises and His resurrection from the grave on Easter.

Unfortunately, one of our human tendencies is to not think much about what we believe. Spending any time on what we believe as Christians is not a priority for many of us. How many of us gave any thought to who God or Jesus Christ is to us over the past week? I bet most of us spent more time debating and discussing the weather, politics, and the coronavirus. But when it comes to the real questions of who is God, who is Jesus Christ, and what is our relationship with them, many of us have a hard time verbalizing it.

To help us to articulate our belief, each of our worship services includes either a Responsive Reading or an Affirmation of Faith. The most familiar Affirmation of Faith is the Apostles' Creed which sums up our beliefs as Christians. It is a statement of faith used by both the Roman Catholic and many Protestant churches. It was originally used by the early Christians as part of the preparation for baptism which usually occurred at Easter. While it is not intended to be a complete summary of the Christian doctrine, it is a brief summary about the Trinity, and the person and works of Jesus Christ.

Now a creed is defined as "a concise formal and authorized statement of the important points of basic Christian doctrine; a statement of the basic beliefs of a religion; and an idea or set of beliefs that guide the actions of a person or a group." The word "creed" is derived from a Latin word meaning "I believe." This statement of faith and belief involves more than an acceptance of the truth, but also a commitment to it. It is your theology. Now theology is a big word and one that most of us only associate with biblical scholars and seminary professors. But in reality, we each have our own individual theology. It's what we talked about a moment ago; who is God to us, who is Jesus Christ and what is our relationship with them? That's theology.

I don't know if you have ever noticed it, but we use the Apostles' Creed on the first Sunday of every month when we participate in communion, because it is one of the most concise statements of the Christian faith. Some of us grew up with the Apostles' Creed and can recite it from memory. However, for some of us, it may be entirely new. No matter what your familiarity is with the Apostles' Creed, have you ever given the statements within it any serious thought? Do you really understand what it means, or is it just a bunch of words that we recite quickly and then sit down. Over the next six weeks, I want us to closely examine each

statement and see what it means to us. Do we understand what we are saying, do we truly believe in that statement?

But before we start that discussion next Sunday, let's pause this morning to think about belief itself? What does it mean when we say we believe? How does belief affect the believer? What are the sources of belief, the reasons for belief?

The word "believe" can have multiple layers of meaning and can be applied to anything from the silly to the profound. For example, some people believe in "Big Foot" or the "Loch Ness Monster." I believe that my Clemson Tigers will be playing in the National Football Championship Game next year. I believe that Ford pickups are the best, but I might be willing to try another brand if the price was right. I also believe that the best way to start a day is with the Bible and Mountain Dew! You may have different beliefs.

However, we also have deeper and more important beliefs. For example, you may believe that small government is important to you or you might be in favor of large government to ensure the welfare of all people. You might believe that every citizen should have the right to carry a gun, or you might believe that we need more restrictive gun laws. There are many other hot topics that we each have strong beliefs or opinions on such as global warming, homosexuality, immigration, the Wall, UFO's, and race relations; the list could go on.

Many deeply held beliefs have the power to motivate us to action, sacrifice, and service. Think about the convictions held by our Founding Fathers who spelled out some of their fundamental beliefs with these words that many Americans have memorized: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Besides God and religion, what are some of the most deeply held beliefs or convictions you have? How did you come by these convictions? For many of us, our parents and upbringing played a key role in shaping our fundamental beliefs. For example on Epiphany Sunday, I noted that I have always taken down our Christmas decorations every year before New Year's Day because my mother said that it was bad luck to leave them up. Also as a southerner, we eat black-eyed peas, collard greens and ham on New Year's Day for good luck. You may have family traditions that have been handed down based on beliefs of your ancestors.

You may have heard the story of the mother and daughter who were preparing the Christmas dinner. The mother cut off part of the ham and threw it in the trash. Her daughter asked her why she was wasting good meat. She said that was the way her mother had always done it. So when grandma walked into the kitchen they asked her why she always cut off part of the ham. To which she replied: "Because my pan was too short."

In addition some of our convictions may have been influenced by a particular writer, teacher or historical character. Many of our beliefs have been shaped by personal experiences, particularly those experiences that deeply touched our hearts – the most painful ones. Because of several deaths in my family due to alcoholism, I do not drink and strongly encourage my sons to avoid it. However, there are also wonderful experiences that have encouraged us to service and caring for others, such as a mission trip, youth camp, or retreat. For example, being in ministry has opened me up to reaching out to those who are hungry and in need. I am definitely more mission oriented today than when I entered the ministry 18 years ago. Our beliefs come from our own personal experiences, not someone else's.

From the earliest times Christians made attempts to summarize their essential beliefs. Beginning in the late second or third centuries these summaries of faith are found in the creeds of the Church, such as the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed provides a concise and very early outline of Christian theology. While the Apostles' Creed likely took its current form during the 400's, an earlier version, usually called the Old Roman Symbol or Old Roman Creed, dates back to the second and early third century, although it existed long before then. There is even a legend that each of the original apostles contributed to its composition, thus, its name.

Our most important beliefs, whether expressed in the Apostles' Creed or in other ways, affect our understanding of what it means to be a Christian; these convictions influence our moral values, behavior and relationships. Ultimately, our most deeply held beliefs or convictions shape our goals, ambitions, hopes, and dreams. These kinds of convictions are seldom scientifically based; nevertheless, we should carefully consider and question them and should be able to make a compelling case for them.

We live in a world today in which our beliefs and opinions are challenged every day. The devil and his agents are always looking for ways to get us to doubt our belief in God and His Son Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 5:8 states: "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." Without a true understanding of what we believe, we will not be able to withstand the attacks and temptations of the devil. Someone once said that if you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything. It is only through a true understanding of what we believe about God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit that we are able to discern the lies and schemes of those who want to lead us astray.

Therefore, over the next six weeks I want us to dig deeper into the belief statements in the Apostles' Creed so that we can not only hold our own with the devil but also help others come to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The bulletin insert gives you an outline of the topics for the next five Sundays of Lent and Easter. Please share this with your friends, neighbors and family members and invite them to join in this discussion.

In the end, what we believe as a Christian is our own individual decision. It should be based on a thorough analysis of the Christian statements of faith. I hope that you will participate in this study of our beliefs as Christians as stated in the Apostles' Creed over the next few weeks. Because what we believe determines who we are and how we live. Amen