

**What Do Methodists Believe?**  
**1 Corinthians 15:1-12**  
**Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb**  
**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**February 6, 2022**

After a month online, it is good to be back in our sanctuary. We are able to come back together due to the tremendous focus and creativity of our CRT. I am proud of all they have done to keep us safe during this time of Covid, and told a friend not long ago about all the CRT had done. He looked puzzled, and when I pressed him, he expressed surprise that we were putting so much effort into Critical Race Theory (!)

We thought we were having a conversation, we were using the same words—but really were talking about entirely different things. What we were talking about is entirely different from where I thought we were going!

This is on my mind as we round out a full month in 1 Corinthians. For the last several weeks, we have read and discussed scriptures concerning spiritual gifts, in some detail. These were Paul's words to the young church in Corinth, as they tried to discern how to relate to one another. This week we have a complete shift, away from "how do we relate to one another," and into "what do we believe?"

Give that some thought for a moment. What does the worldwide Christian church believe? Or the American church? Or the Methodist Church? Every one of these is split, right?

How about the Woodbury United Methodist Church?

Today's scripture is about belief, but ultimately it is also about unity. It is about what Paul believed, what the early church believed, but it asks you, personally. What do **you** believe? I am curious, how many of you have been part of a church that recited the Nicene Creed, or the Apostle's Creed, each week or from time to time as part of worship? Raised hands? (*Most hands are raised.*) We do those sometimes, but in my experience you don't have that strong of a creedal focus in Methodist Churches as you do in some other traditions.

A creed is a statement of what we believe. We say it together to affirm that we all believe the same thing. Creeds are also intentional to specify what we do NOT believe, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly — meaning that we are very specific about what we believe such that anything else has been excluded. That is where these creeds came from historically, as the early church struggled to develop a clear understanding of what it believed.

Please open your hymnal to page 880, the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed, perhaps unsurprisingly, came from the Council of Nicea in 325. The Roman Emperor was willing to have Christianity as the official Roman religion and even become a Christian — but before this could really happen, it was necessary to decide what it meant to be a Christian. Was Jesus God? Or a man possessed by the Holy Spirit? Or could he have been God himself? Was Jesus someone created by God? A second in command? Or was something else going on here? The creeds were meant to answer these questions once and for all, to make our group more cohesive, and also to get rid of the heretics. If your belief was something excluded by the creed, then either you chance belief or you accept that you are a heretic.

On the opposite page, 881, note the Apostle's Creed. The Apostles Creed gets used more often, in my experience.

The Presbyterian church of my youth would have us recite the Apostles Creed pretty much every single Sunday.

What if there are some parts of this that make me uncomfortable. Ok to change the apostle's creed? Maybe? Probably not? How about the word "Catholic"? Note that the United Methodist hymnal includes an asterisk showing that it means universal. In my research, I learned that we now say "universal" for very specific reasons related to an immigrant congregation. The word "catholic" holds deeply ingrained negative feelings. We've had many discussions about the difference in English for the words catholic and Catholic, but the best solution for us was to simply use a more accurate translation for our community.

Most of our churches also omit "he descended to the dead" or bracket it off so you can choose to include or skip. At least we won't put it down as "descended to hell" — we always cut that out. In my study, I learned that the omission of "he went down into hell" at least for American Methodists is the result of a typo—literally a typo!—in the 1786 printing (not edition, printing) of the baptismal ritual (not the creed itself) Sunday Service. Why do we know this was a typo? Because the non-baptismal version for morning and evening prayer retained "he descended into hell." Acting in ways that do not make for good relationships with other Christian bodies and retaining

typos because we don't want to admit there was a typo seem like poor reasons to continue to use the so-called traditional version that omits "he descended into hell."

That question about can you change the Apostles Creed? We did just that! — note the ecumenical creed below it, preserving the original. These are all things that many people who most of us would consider good Christians would recite regularly during church, but some of us have questions. Resurrection of the body? — born of the Virgin Mary? — is seated at the right hand of God the father?. I can go on and on with this. How much of that do you believe? That is not a rhetorical question, in fact that is the main point of my sermon today — just what is it that you believe?

The United Methodist Church is not traditionally a creedal faith tradition, nor do we have dogmas or statements of faith. The UMC has often been celebrated as a “big tent” church with a wide spectrum of theologies allowing for diversity of thought, diversity of faith, and diversity of community. In a Christian tradition I love, it is something I love in particular. Did you know that George W. Bush is a United Methodist? Did you know that Hillary Clinton is a United Methodist? Ours is a tradition broad enough to allow people with beliefs that are very far apart on the political spectrum in particular, to coexist quite well in faith.

Some of you may be thinking wait a second. Of course we have things you have to believe. That's the *Book of Discipline*, right? We could argue that, but that was never the intention. In my research I found this tremendous statement, from the preface of the 1944 Methodist BOD:

The Methodist BOD is a growth rather than the purposive creation. The founders of Methodism did not work with a set plan as to details. They dealt with conditions as they arose...In such a process of adjustment, the BOD became not a book of definite rules, nor yet a formal code, but rather a record of the successive stages of spiritual insight attained by Methodists under the grace of Christ. We have therefore expected that the BOD would be administered, not merely as a legal document, but as a revelation of the Holy Spirit working in and through our people. We reverently insist that a fundamental aim of Methodism is to make her organization an instrument for the development of spiritual life. **We do not regard the machinery as sacred in itself, but we do regard as very sacred the souls for whom the church lives and works** (*emphasis mine*). We do now express the faith and hope that the prayerful observance of the spiritual intent of the BOD may be to the people called Methodist a veritable means of grace.

That is an amazing statement! The very structure of our church is intended as a means of grace. That means if I ever ask you to serve on a committee, or even lead a committee, one expectation is that doing so will help you grow in your faith, ultimately bringing you closer to Jesus. If that sounds like the kind of thing you say to get people to agree to do the behind-the-scenes work of the church, I urge you to ask that question to anybody who's been serving in leadership for a few years and see what they have to say about it.

If you still aren't convinced that serving in leadership can help grow your relationship with Jesus, I'd like to point out that today's Scripture, and in fact a big chunk of the New Testament, consists of Paul as an early church leader writing to other church leaders, sharing his insights and what he has learned, and today we recognize them as inspired by God.

John Wesley once said, "Though we may not think alike, may we love alike." This concept is one of the reasons why the UMC has not declared particular statements of faith; when a faith community does that, invisible fences are created delineating some who are in and others who are out. My tone and inflection as I say those words imply that I think that is not necessarily a good thing. And yet, that is exactly what Paul is trying to do in our text from 1 Corinthians 15. He is getting at the core of a statement of faith, and he is personalizing it so you can better understand what he says what he says.

If you were the one writing this statement, how would it be different? Would you include different things? Stress different things? For instance, he spends about half of this text listing people who saw Jesus after his resurrection. Why? I'd guess at least some people in Corinth were skeptical that the resurrection had ever happened, so in his statement he lists names, and groups of people, and in order, so that people might accept the resurrection. Paul mentions that what happened was in accordance with the scriptures — that the things Jesus did and the things done to Jesus are all in accordance with scriptures. Paul wants you to know that if you take scripture seriously, then you are going to need to take Jesus seriously.

Are you in, or are you out? Are you even one of us?

Remember, I've told you that we United Methodists don't really use creeds to determine whether or not you are one of us. Instead of declaring "this is what United Methodists believe," the people of the UMC have instead identified areas where our faith in our current social and contemporary contexts calls us to live in ways nurturing to our discipleship in our day to day lives. We have traditionally engaged these topics that cross our faith and day-to-day lives in a document called

The Social Principles. If that doesn't sound familiar, it is part of the *Book of Discipline*, and so something we take very seriously.

Today I want us to consider creeds and statements of faith, so talking about the book of discipline is admittedly a bit of a sidebar. I'm going to stick with that side bar just a moment longer, regarding the things you must do and must believe in the book of discipline, specifically with regard to the impending split in our denomination. While our elements of doctrine can be found within the Book of Discipline, the Book in its entirety is not doctrinal. When it comes to our organization and structure including around ordination and consecration, those were never intended to be doctrinal and our doctrine was never intended to be dogmatic.

Throughout our history, some have seen our doctrine as dogma and our polity as doctrine. Others have not. It is this fundamental difference that is and always has been at the heart of our divisions. Pretty much every split was over this as well, a result of either the more or less dogmatically oriented side peeling away. Ironically, many denominations traditionally seen as more conservative by many Methodists actually split because they were **less** dogmatic such as Pentecostals who even though they may be more conservative were far more willing for polity to change based on the movement of the Spirit which is why they had ordained female preachers decades prior to United Methodists.

Unlike statements of faith or creeds, a person can choose to not agree with or believe parts of the Social Principles, and yet they are guideposts for all United Methodists on their journey to perfection. They work as ethical points of reference for us to work from as a faith community. So that is a challenge to every one of us. I will never give you a list and make you swear to believe it. Instead, you need to do the work on your own, and you can't copy the answers from your neighbor. It is between you and God.

Coming up with your own personal statement of faith is a wonderful exercise. It helps you to take seriously the things in our tradition, and to determine where you are with God. If you have done this before, great. Consider doing it again. Over the course of your life, you are going to find some things harder to believe, and discover other things as central to your relationship with Christ.

Confirmands — consider this as a part of your process, not a homework assignment to be done. Take what you learn each week, and add it into your statement of belief. Give yourself time to sit with it, pray about it, discuss with your mentors, and change it if you don't believe it. Restate it

into your own words. Do this process and it will help bring your relationship with God to a place where it is active in your heart and your brain.

Two other things. One thing about being a United Methodist is our belief that you develop your own personal beliefs through a combination of scripture, of church tradition, of reason, and experience. Your experiences and reasoning are going to change over time, and scripture and church tradition will change in how you understand them. This is how you grow in your faith, and it is a lifelong process that will bring much meaning to your life if you take it seriously.

Here's my final thought. Don't know where to begin? We are going to the Lord's Table in a moment, to share together in one of just two sacraments we have, doing as Christ commanded us. What is your statement of faith around communion? Where does it fit in, what does it do? Yes I could give you the church's official language — but what does it mean to YOU? We believe we encounter Christ when we accept the invitation to participate.

What do I believe? That there is no better place to begin exploring what you believe than with Christ. Amen.