

This I Believe
Credo: What Does It Mean to ‘Believe’?

John 3:1-16

There was a time—a long time—when I lost my faith entirely. I was a young adult, just finishing law school. I’d been taught to think critically about just about everything, to question and probe what other people wrote or said until it made sense to me. I’d learned to dig through layers of evidence to find something that might be called the ‘truth’. And as I learned those skills, much of what I had just accepted as part of Christian faith stopped making sense to me. When I asked questions, or said I wasn’t sure I believed those things, it seemed like I was doing something wrong, like I hadn’t done my homework or looked in the right place for the obvious answers. Looking back, I’m not sure whether anyone actually said those things to me, or whether that was just the voice in my head.

In any event, I left church. I just stopped going. I thought that to stay, I’d have to pretend to believe in things that seemed to me un-believable. I wanted to talk about my doubts. I was uncomfortable around people who seemed so much more sure than I was. I didn’t go back to church again for ten years.

When I did try church again, I’d lost the thread of faith. “What does ‘faith’ mean?” I wondered. If I say “I believe” about the right things—that Jesus was the Son of God, that he died for our sins, that he rose on Easter—does that do it? Would saying ‘yes’ to those things make me a Christian, a believer, a person who belongs in church?

For the next few weeks, we’re going to be talking in worship about what it means to ‘believe’. About what Christians collectively have believed—now and in the past—and about how that has changed over time. And I will encourage you to think for yourself about what *you* believe. I hope you’ll write it down, and maybe even to speak it out loud, when we come to Pentecost, in the middle of May.

I had a few questions as I began to think about these things. (Maybe you do too. You can write your questions on the attendance card that you put in the offering plate later in the service. They’ll get to me, and I’ll get back to you.)

Here are my questions: Does it matter what you believe? Can’t you be a good person without believing anything? We all know someone who is just good-hearted, without any religion or even philosophy to guide them. Generosity, kindness, honesty, compassion—all those good-value actions can come out of anyone, whether they’re religious or not—right? Isn’t it our actions that matter? Can you just work on those things, brush up your capacity to give, to listen, to love other people, without subscribing to any religious beliefs? What matters—what you believe, or how you live?

Many people think that what makes someone a Christian is a certain set of beliefs: that there’s a confession, or a statement of doctrine that you have to subscribe to to get right with God, and to identify yourself as part of this religious tradition. What makes Christianity different from other

religions, this view would say, is a particular set of beliefs. In fact, if you go to the website beliefnet.com, you can find a tool they call Belief-O-Matic. The introduction to the tool says,

Even if YOU don't know what faith you are, Belief-O-Matic knows. Answer 20 questions about your concept of God, the afterlife, human nature, and more, and Belief-O-Matic will tell you what religion (if any) you practice...or ought to consider practicing.

They're trying to be funny, of course. But the reason it's funny is that it's pretty close to the truth about how we think. And I'm not so sure that it makes much sense. Belief all by itself isn't worth much. You can believe all the right things and still be miserable, or tied up in your fear or worry or resentment. Intellectual faith—believing the right things about God—all by itself, doesn't transform your life. What matters is how your beliefs shape and guide you. Our beliefs are supposed to give form to our lives, re-shape us to live differently than we would on our own. Over time, your beliefs do shape you: the way you think, the kind of person you are becoming.

The best way to measure the truth of your beliefs is to look at their impact on your life. Does what you believe about God, Jesus, yourself, humanity, make you less afraid? More generous? More loving? If the answer is 'yes', then it seems like you've found something true and good. If your faith makes you more judgmental or angry, or it focuses you mostly on what other people are doing wrong, then I wonder if your God is the same God of love Jesus talked about.

"Creeds" are what we call statements of faith, or beliefs, that the Church has adopted at different times over the last 2,000 years. The word "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo*. *Credo* is a good word. It's bigger, more powerful, than just saying, "Yeah...I believe that." *Credo* means: This is the truth that lives inside of me. It changes how I act, what I do, how I think about everything else.

Marcus Borg noted that the root of the word *credo* suggests something that isn't passive belief at all. It means something more like "what I give my heart to". The thing you believe in, that becomes your *credo*, engages you at a deeper level than your intellect. It's belief that happens at your center, in your gut. To have a *credo* is to engage deeply, to be in relationship with, the thing you believe in. In Christianity, the object of this kind of believing isn't a statement or a proposition; it's a person. And so it follows: that in English, the word *believe* is related to the word *be-love*. What we believe is what we love. Who we believe in is who we love.¹

This is the kind of connection that Nicodemus came to Jesus searching for. Unlike some other characters in the Gospel stories, Nicodemus didn't come inquiring about how you get eternal life. His question to Jesus wasn't about who gets saved and who doesn't. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, we are told—which means he was already working hard at his religion. He wasn't worried about whether he was going to heaven or hell. He came to Jesus because Jesus had said some things that made him think again about what he believed. Nicodemus was asking Jesus about truth. How do I know what is true? he asked. I'm drawn to what you say, but how can I know for

¹ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 39-40.

sure that you come from the God who has always been the solid ground beneath my feet? That listening to you will take me closer to that same God?

Jesus' response to Nicodemus was, frankly, pretty confusing—to Nicodemus, and to us. He said some hard-to-understand things about being born of the Spirit—different than when your body was born; about the wind, about how no one can actually understand God. And then he said a sentence with such beauty and strength, that ever since it was written down, people have grabbed onto it and held tight.

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son,
so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.*

Often, this verse is read as though what Jesus wanted to do was to divide the world into believers and non-believers. Jesus did sometimes put people in categories; at other moments he talked about wheat and weeds, sheep and goats, trees that produce fruit and those that don't. But not here. Jesus wasn't trying here to create conditions or draw limits on the reach of God's love. What he wanted to convey to Nicodemus about what an extravagant, big-hearted lover God is. About what giving your heart to—*be-loving*—that God makes possible.

Maybe what Jesus was saying was something more like this:

This is how God loves the world: God has given you the best part of himself. That's what I'm here to bring you. And this is why: so that no one has to be destroyed or condemned ever again. No one is too far lost to be found again. Anyone—everyone—can have a whole and lasting life. Just believe it...be-love it. Give your heart to this truth, this God.

Maybe all that hard stuff Jesus said to Nicodemus at the beginning of his speech was another reminder that God refuses to be known intellectually. God can only be known in the act of love. That's what it means to make this God your *credo*.

I want to say one more thing. Many of us are more practiced at saying what we don't believe in than we are at explaining what we do believe. It's easy to spot the beliefs you reject, especially in a tradition with as long and checkered a history as Christianity. Over these last twenty centuries, the Church has done some pretty terrible things in the name of God. The Church is full of people, and sometimes structures, that don't always look like the God we preach. There's a lot to want to dissociate yourself from...with good reason. The church is not worthy of your ultimate belief, or your loyalty, or giving your heart to. No institution is. The Church is not God.

I have a friend, a pastor who is a much tougher cookie than I am, who would say to her congregation, "Stop fighting with the God you don't believe in and find the one you do." Who is the God worth believing in, shaping your life around? Find that God. Love that God. Let *that* God have some space in your life. Let *that* God be the one you give your heart to.