

June 30, 2019
Rev. Dr Jane Florence
“Jesus PR Team”
John 13:34-35



The second year of seminary at Perkins School of Theology we all took a class called Systematic Theology; it held the reputation of being the hardest class of seminary. We would conclude the class by writing our Credo paper. In August when we began the class, I proposed a four-word credo: Love God; Love others. Then I got the class syllabus and knew that would not fly. We spent the entire year unpacking the doctrines one at a time. Our year's study would culminate in thirty pages that set forth our understanding of all the doctrines of our faith: our Doctrine of God, the Holy spirit, Jesus, the church, salvation, atonement, theodicy, resurrection, etc... It was our faith laid out nice and neat in thirty pages, tied in a bow, referenced, cited and original without contradictions. It was built up as the make-it or break it assignment of the entire seminary. We spent the year reading the ancient formulations of the doctrines that were debated and argued. Original sin was first alluded to in the 2nd century by [Irenaeus](#), but truly promoted by Augustine's formulation after 412 CE. Atonement doctrines developed in far dramatic differences from the ransom theory of 2nd century to Anselm's Jesus paid the price for your sins in 1100 CE. The doctrine of resurrection was of the soul first proposed then body resurrection introduced later.

I suppose the most astounding learning for me from the class was that there were different doctrines that had evolved, were fought over, embraced and rejected. The winners were canonized as saint over last 2,000 years; some losers of the debates were beheaded or exiled. I thought the Christian beliefs that I learned in Sunday School were THE Christian beliefs that everyone who is Christian agrees to. In seminary, I learned that the tenets I had been taught were those claimed in early 20th century under the general heading of Fundamentalism which insists certain beliefs essential or fundamental to be Christian. In seminary, I was exposed to so many more, more original/ancient beliefs - who knew that there were differences! I thought these were always what Christians believed; and I thought we all believed exactly the same.

While Fundamentalism solidified certain beliefs as mandatory- Inclusive Christianity* maintains space for differences in understanding of doctrines. Instead of offering a list of specific doctrines which must be believed, Inclusive Christianity offers an alternative statement: the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe. So you can believe in substitutionary atonement or you may not,

or you can believe in body resurrection or you may not; you can believe in creationism or in evolution... Inclusive Christianity¹ maintains the true expression of our beliefs is how we behave towards one another not an intellectual agreement to a particular doctrine.

I remember a cartoon strip of Lucy and Charlie Brown. Charlie is standing in front of the "Psychiatrist is in" booth that Lucy occasionally operated. She asks him what his philosophy of life is. He replies that he doesn't know. She tells him that's his problem. "You have to have a philosophy of life!" she screams in all capitals!,and she goes off on a tirade about the value of said philosophy. Finally, Charlie Brown gets a chance to reply and so he asks her, "so what is your philosophy?" To which she replies, "it's simple. Look out for Number One!" I'm not sure many of us would claim that as our philosophy of life not aloud anyway. Especially not here, Jesus never offered that as the greatest commandment. I would have to agree at least in principle with Lucy; there is value in identifying our philosophy for life. There is value in knowing where our priority lies, value in having a compass to bring us back on track, a grounding to help make decisions of day and life. However, identifying a philosophy for living can also create some trouble. I think we suffer the most when we have a philosophy claiming one guiding principle and then we really live according to another.

The 8th century BCE prophet Micah addressed the disharmony of the Israelites. He sets the scene in a courtroom. I'm not a lawyer, but I've seen it on tv, so I know how it works. Charges are leveled against the defendant. The prosecution makes its case. Micah listed many charges against Israel: the powerful are snatching land away from the impoverished 2:2, you 'tear the skin off my people' 3:2, you inflict violence upon the poor 3:5, the political leaders are taking bribes and religious leaders sell the pulpit for money 3:11. After the charges, it's time for the defendant, Israel, to make her defense against these crimes- to prove them wrong, or at least to introduce a reasonable doubt. Instead she skips that part, basically she pleads 'guilty as charged' and asks for sentencing. But is there a note of sarcasm in her reply?

Israel says, so what do you want from me? What do we owe God for these crimes? How about some burnt offerings? God likes burnt offerings... surely one ram will not suffice this time for all our crime, shall we slaughter a whole heard- thousands rams and offer that upon the altar? Will that pay our fine? Or instead of bringing a bottle of oil to the altar as a customary offering, how about we bring 10,000 rivers of oil? Will that get us back in good standings? What if we give up our first born? No really, what can we do to atone for our behavior?

Now the courtroom enters the sentencing phase. All wait in suspended silence to hear the verdict and consequences of their crimes. Micah emerges from the judge's chambers and reports that God does not accept any of these plea bargaining.

¹ Progressive Christianity, Inclusive Christianity, Wisdom Tradition, Mystic, Desert Traditions are all terms which may be used.

God does not want your slaughtered rams. God does not want your rivers of oil. God does not want your regrets or your empty confessions. God does not want your beliefs. God does not want your hollow words. You know what God wants, Micha says.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.

Micah says, you say you are God's people – then act like it! You say you are devoted to God- Show it! Not with empty ritual or sacrifices in the temple- show it with your life. It isn't about holding a particular BELIEF that makes one a follower of Jesus... it is about following Jesus instructions to LOVE one another BY THIS they will know you are my followers. Not by the creeds you proclaim to believe, but by the way you LOVE one another. Jesus teaches along with ancient prophets that God desires more than acquiescence to a belief. God desires justice, kindness, relationship.

Justice is measured by how well the most vulnerable in the community are living. God desires love- ethical love of neighbor and stranger. God desires a genuine relationship, a walk of reverence and honesty and personal integrity. Biblical teachings offer the way of true harmony in life. They demand a congruence between what we say and how we live.

Jesus didn't walk the countryside of Galilee telling people what they had to say to enter heaven; he walked around the countryside of Galilee showing people how to live. He offered healing and forgiveness. He prayed and shared his food. He wept and loved compassionately in grace and in mercy and he said, Go and do likewise. Go and do likewise.

Our faith is not about doing in order to earn a crown in heaven or get extra goodies back from God. Our faith is not about doing as a payment for our sins. Our faith is about doing as acts of compassion to show that we believe to show what Jesus lived - to be the front line PR team for the Way of Jesus.

I Moved to town last May, but I didn't start here until July 1. I didn't know faces of my congregation. I thought to myself, be good. No cutting anyone off in traffic just to make that turn in time- no sarcastic comments to the grocery sacker if the bread ends up at the bottom of the bag, You don't know who might be a member of your congregation. They might Remember your poor behavior, when you step into the pulpit that first Sunday. That's the lady that Then I thought, shouldn't we all think that way all the time.. aren't all of us showing the world Jesus- or supposed to be? Our faith is about showing what we believe through how we live.

We cannot claim to follow the teachings of Jesus and live by a philosophy of Look out for Number one or pass laws to make my life, finances, health, situation better, at the expense or while neglecting others. Love kindness. Speak, show, God's care and mercy. Become a distributor of kindness.

Jesus said, all will know you are my followers if you do as I do and love one another. We are Jesus' PR team. How we act tells the world about Jesus more than any words we can say. Amen.