

July 28, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
“Faith Seeking Understanding”
Acts 8 :28-31 I Corinthians 13 : 9-12



Each Sunday for the last seven weeks, I have based our worship theme off of one of the points identified by the Center for Progressive Christianity which follow the words: by calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean that we are Christians who.....

1. believe the path of Jesus leads us to experience the sacred, oneness and unity of life
2. believe that we can also draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey
3. believe in forming a fully inclusive community
4. know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe
5. believe there is more value in questions than in absolutes
6. strive for peace and justice for all people
7. strive to protect and restore the integrity of our earth

I began the series by noticing that the Christian umbrella holds a wide diversity of beliefs. Christianity Today cites 38,000 Christian denominations in the world with approximately 2 billion people all claiming to follow the same teacher in very different ways. Many today are recognizing that the broad term of “Christian” doesn’t really help people to describe exactly what they personally believe. With so many different denominations, (38,000 in the world) people often ask me, “ So what do Methodists believe?” That’s a pretty straight forward question, one might think. A fair question. Fair, yes, Simple, no. United Methodist believe a wide range of things theologically and socially. We are not a creedal denomination. That does not mean that we don’t share creeds – statements of faith. In the back of our hymnal- # 880 -889 lists ten different creeds and affirmations of faith that are sometimes used in UMC worship. There’s the Nicene Creed- hammered out throughout the fourth century, and the Apostle’s Creed pulled together as we know it now around the 8th century, and there are newer statements from Canada and Korea. Some of us might prefer one; some another; some might not feel comfortable with any of them That’s part of the UMC, we all don’t have to agree to the same creed. So when someone asks me what do United Methodists believe? I explain that there are progressives and moderates and conservatives and fundamentalist all living under the name, United Methodist- at least for now. It’s a wide spectrum. We differ in our beliefs. From within that spectrum, I can tell only tell people what I believe today.

What I believe today is different from what I believed forty years ago. What I believe today is different from what I believed twenty years ago. I hope what I believe twenty years from now, is not identical to what I say today. I hope that I will continue to learn more. I hope that I will continue to study more. I hope that I will have experienced the Holy Divine more. I hope that I am always weighing my understandings of today against what I read in scripture, and what I experience in life and in prayer and in God, and what I learn from other pilgrims on this journey with me.

I don’t believe our faith is meant to be static. I don’t believe we should be reciting pat answers from our childhood that we haven’t revisited in light of our adult life experience. Or using “greeting card theology” to inform our faithful responses to today’s needs and today situations. I believe our faith has always been evolving and should always be evolving.

Those male priest who got together 300 years after Jesus lived and died wrote the Nicene creed did not all agree. They argued and debated the controversy – for it was up for debate – it was a controversy – the question of the humanity and/or divinity of Jesus. They argued and debated around and around was Jesus fully human? was Jesus fully divine? Then they voted. and said, “Yes” The statement of their faith –as best they could define their faith- as they were seeking to understand the mystery of the faith was the majority opinion.

Think of all the advancements that have been made in the study of medicine and science and education and mathematics and every other field of study in the last 1700 years. I seriously doubt that there is any field of study, hard or ‘soft’ science, arts or humanities that still operates based on a committee decision of the 4th century. Surely, the statements of our faith have made some advancements, some clarity, some greater depth as well... both collectively and individually.

It’s important that we, each of us, think about what we believe. It’s important that we, each of us, find some words to express what we believe, for today. Even as we search for those words, we know that our words must inevitably fall short. Whatever we try to say about the Holy God of the Universe is less than the Divine. Whatever words we try to use to convey a divine sacred experience, will be only words, but they are all we have – for now. We don’t need to claim absolute answers, but we need to know what our faith is right now. If we don’t know ... then how can we express it to others ? If we don’t know what we believe, then how can we employ our belief system – to address the situations of today- to guide our decisions and actions of today – to inform our responses ... to our immediate circumstances.

According to one classic definition, theology is “faith seeking understanding.” That’s what takes place in the scene from Acts.

Philip was led by the Spirit to a man from a foreign land who was seeking. The Ethiopian eunuch was studying the Hebrew’s scripture of Isaiah. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, the man said, “how can I unless someone guides me ?” Philip climbed in and began sharing his understanding. This man recognized that we need one another to help us, to guide us, to share with one another. That’s what we are about. We come together here. We hear some scripture. We sing and pray and listen then we join in conversations with one another. We talk to others in Sunday school classes, or lectionary groups, or spiritual friends. We get with one another and wrestle with it, so that it can take root in our beings. It can soak into , permeate, ferment within and become a part of us. Our time together is not about all of us walking away believing the same thing. It’s not about us walking away reciting the same old words that have no meaning for us now.

If our faith is a living faith, with passion and fire and meaning-- if our faith is something that informs who we are: how we think about ourselves and others and how we act, then our theology- our God talk – our faith talk – does matter. That’s what those who call ourselves progressive Christians mean in their final point which summaries, collects all the others:

8. We commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.

So let us enter into a process of articulating our faith. Let us enter into a process of talking about what we believe. Let us dig deep. I am confident that as we continue in faith seeking understanding, surely God will meet us there.

Thanks be to God.