

The Jesus Creed

Let us pray: May your Word, O God, be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The late Fred Rogers tells the story of a visit he had with a good friend of his, Helen Ross. Helen was very knowledgeable in the field of human growth and development.

Helen also was a woman who had cancer. After one operation for cancer and some follow up chemotherapy, Helen chose to refuse treatment after her cancer reappeared.

When Fred Rogers saw her she was quite frail but very interested in everything he had to tell her about his television work in Pittsburgh and some of their mutual friends there. Some of the time he just held her hand and they said nothing. After one of those silences, Helen said to Mr. Rogers, "Do you ever pray for people, Fred?"

"Of course I do", he replied and so he prayed, "Dear God encircle us with your love wherever we may be. Amen.

After the prayer, Helen looked up and replied, "That's what it is isn't it? It's love. That what it's all about."

In today's reading from Matthew, we hear Jesus summing up the purpose of life in a similar way.

Some Bible experts came up to Jesus one day and challenged him with a question: "Teacher, which of the commandments is the greatest?" (The question was a common one in Jesus' day. There were something like 613 commandments listed in the law of Moses and rabbis often debated about which ones were weightier-more important.)

Jesus was ready. In fact he welcomed the question and answered them with a teaching that is still being passed on today by his followers. It is what we call "The Great Commandment". You know it by heart.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." (and) "you shall love your neighbor as yourself". Mark 12:30-31

Scott McKnight, a New Testament Scholar, refers to this teaching of Jesus as "The Jesus' Creed". He uses the word 'creed', not in the sense of religious beliefs, but rather more as a personal vision of one's

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life-what one lives for. It is a path for living. If we comb through the Gospel stories, you quickly see that everything Jesus did and taught had to do with the love of God and neighbor.

What I really like about the “Jesus Creed” is its positive nature. When you hear the word ‘commandment’ what do you usually think of first? Perhaps the ten commandments? I know I do. In fact the ten commandments is a step in the right direction. If you get the commandments down to ten, it’s a lot easier to remember because there’s one for each finger. Yet most of these are stated negatively in terms of what we’re not supposed to do: “You shall not steal; you shall not lie; you shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not covet

On the other hand the great commandment gets it down to two and states it positively, “You shall love!”

First, you shall love the Lord your God.

The most important thing about the Jesus Creed is this: Christianity is not primarily about rules. And it is not primarily about being religious. It’s all about relationship-specifically about our relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ. That is why the late theologian, Marcus Borg, referred to the Great Commandment as the “Great Relationships”. Others call it the Two Loves(which, as we shall see, is really One love).

What does it mean to love God? The Psalter reading today suggests to basic ways: to love God back and to love God forward. In Psalm 116 a person of Hebrew faith, from ancient times, expresses their love for God with a beautiful poem, after having recovere from a serious illness. Listen: “I love the Lord because he has heard my prayer...”. That phrase connotes something deeper than religious activity; it is the language of relationship. Psalms are poems which are not only ‘said’, they are ‘sung’! Psalm 116 is one of many love songs to God in the Bible.

What’s more, with this song, the Psalmist not only returns God’s love, but also shares God’s love-passes it on. Like we sing in one of my favorite Pilgrim Lodge songs: “It only takes a spark, to get a fire going, but soon all those around, will warm up in its glowing, that’s how it is with God’s love, once you experience it, you spread God’s love to everyone, you want to pass it on!”

Secondly, getting back to Psalm 116, once recovered from a serious illness, the Psalmist returns to worship with his congregation and gives God a gift- a thank offering! This reminds me of the true meaning behind our weekly offerings. The gift we offer is a tangible way of loving God back.

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At the same time it is a tangible way of loving God forward. Supporting the various ministries of the church has a ripple effect which widens the circles of God's love. (I don't know about you, but I personally miss the ritual of receiving the offering. Yes, I send my pledge to the church once a month, but the act of making the offering during worship, means so much to me. For worship itself is communal. During the worship service, each of us, in our own way, offers our gifts to God, not just the financial gift in the offering plate, but also our gifts of music, our prayers, and especially ourselves, by attending the service and participating.

Paying attention to God is one significant way to practice our love for God. I remember a retreat I attended once in which the leader gave us an assignment to reflect on and then she divided us into pairs. Each of us had to interview the other person and our primary task in the interview was to listen. After we finished taking turns doing this, the leader asked us about our experience. One woman shared how awesome it was to have another person take the time to listen to her. And the leader replied, "Isn't that wonderful?" One of the ways we love another person is to give them our full attention!

Listening, in and of itself, is an act of love. This morning we have been loving God, not only by listening to songs of praise and thanksgiving (and maybe like me, singing along with them), but also by listening for God's words in the Scriptures, and, even by listening for God's Words in, around, and through my feeble words. Listening to the sermon each week, whether in church or on Zoom, or reading it in an comfortable chair at home, is an act of love! It is all made possible by the Holy Spirit of God. Of course it doesn't just have to happen on Sunday morning, it can happen anytime each day, when we take a moment to listen for God's word by reading just a few verses of the Bible or....by listening to creation!

Another way of loving God is through our prayers. What parent doesn't want their children to share with them what's going on inside of them-whether it be worry or gratitude or simply the ordinary stuff of daily life. I cherish the phone calls when I get to check in with my adult son, who turns 43 tomorrow. Why? Because we love each other and the phone call nurtures that love.

One form of prayer that is particularly conducive to loving God is contemplative prayer. In this type of prayer, we spend most of our time simply 'being still' ; "being with God". It's more listening, than talking.

I want to close by sharing some thoughts by the late Marcus Borg on the word 'creed'. It comes from the Latin, credo, which means "I believe". Over the years the meaning of that phrase has changed.

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To say “I believe” originally meant, “I give my heart to” “my loyalty”. In English, the words ‘believe’ and ‘belove’ are related. Therefore according to Borg “... the Christian life is about believing God and all that God believes”. (*The Heart of Christianity*, pp.40-41)

Since God loves our neighbor too, one primary way to love what God loves, is to love who God loves, which means to love our neighbor. Let’s talk some more about that next week.