

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

What I Believe

February 5, 2006 Mark 1:29-39 David Orendorff

The title of the sermon was at one time the struggle of my faith. I didn't really know what I believed with the whole of my mind, heart and soul. I grew up in a Christian home and the United Methodist Church of Oklahoma. I was confirmed at Christ United Methodist Church in Casper, Wyoming. I had a good religious education in the faith I grew up with. I was taught to accept Christ as my savior. This was reaffirmed by several Southern Baptist friends who would take me to church and revivals with them. I knew that Jesus had died for my sins and if I was to be saved, to go to heaven, then I must accept Jesus' gift for my guilt.

Then in late High School and early college I began to struggle with the whole image of God as judge, ruler, and king. You see, I had also been brought up with God as love. In fact, God as love was the dominant image in my mind. And a God of love, of compassion, healing and justice didn't fit neatly with the God of condemning laws. If God really cared about me, about everyone, how could God send anyone to hell? Wouldn't a God of love want everyone, not just certain right believing Christians, with him just as a father wants all his sons (both the prodigal and the faithful) with him? And why did good people, even hard believing Southern Baptists have divorces, get sick, get killed if God loved them most?

I struggled not knowing what to believe and there was no one that seemed able to answer my questions. Then I read Nikos Kazantzakis "The Last Temptation of Christ" and the Jesus that grew in my mind was a Jesus with an insatiable thirst for compassion and justice. This was not a Jesus who judged the world based on what they believed about him, but a Jesus that cared for every sick child, every leper, every prostitute, thief and tax collector. This was a Jesus whose love for humanity was not limited by race or national origin, by friend or enemy, but who willing died rather than curse those who murdered him.

It was the summer of 1968. I was living off meat and cheese scraps from a corner grocery, thank God for the butcher's compassion, in a run down basement apartment in Denver. In that summer I both nearly died of hepatitis and found life in Jesus. I still carry the hepatitis with me. And I also still carry the faith that found me and saved me. I came to claim the Christ of compassion and justice as the way, the truth and the life for me.

I began to believe in the God who is agape, servant love. I began to believe in the God of free grace that reaches into my life, your life, the life

of all the world, with a healing and teaching touch. And I gave my life to that God and not the God of law. It was a child's decision even at 19 years old. Even so it is the foundational decision of my life that has followed. I want to be like Jesus with a faith in God that hungers for compassion and justice.

Only as I have prayed, studied, worshipped and served have I come to know that I was not alone in this struggle to know God. I was well into my 40's, long past seminary and doctoral work when I discovered that the very question of my soul and faith was the question of John and Charles Wesley. They too put aside a faith founded on law when the amazing grace of God captured their hearts.

And then as I did some casual study of quantum physics I discovered that the primary principle, the unexplained principle of the smallest and greatest of matter are the forces of unity, of cooperation, of interdependency, dare I say love. Without this inexplicable relatedness of all things no thing would exist.

And a friend gave me a book on biology, which makes the same observation. No organic life would exist if for some reason all organic life didn't relate to and care for the cells and life around it. And if cells cease caring for each other, such as cancerous cells, then life is at risk. At the roots of my cellular existence is not law, though the laws of physics and the laws of life certainly help guide, but the grace that holds all things together and makes all things good.

And so I have come to believe with my mind, to trust with my heart and to live with my life that God is love; specifically that God as creator is unconditionally caring for all creation; that God as Christ is the embodiment of a life lived in compassion and justice, including forgiveness and healing; that God as Holy Spirit is the nudge of conscience, of compassion, of wisdom; nudges towards acts of justice, purpose and holiness.

It was today's scripture that launched me into this confession of faith. We are at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has been baptized by John, blessed and adopted as Son by God, has been into the wilderness to face the darkest parts of himself and there ministered to by the angels, and with John's arrest called his first disciples, and begun his ministry.

It is significant that the first acts of Jesus' ministry are healing and teaching. To be Christ is to heal the world of its demons and to teach the world of the good news, the gospel, of God's love. This is the power which John promised would be in the one who followed him. This is the gift of God with us. I so believe that the God who is servant love is the ultimate truth of all things, the "isness" of being, that I see with the eyes of radical

belief, radical trust and a radical life. I see God in all things and all times. I give you an example:

Last April Claudette Benz, just three months after the Tsunami struck the Asian islands and coasts, forwarded to me an email. The writer is unknown to Claudette and to me, but in my mind clearly sees the truth of God. The subject line reads "God's Elephant."

No one is insignificant in God's eyes, and His care for sparrows, finches, eagles, and elephants is a constant reminder that He cares for you, and for me. What He makes, He cherishes.

Consider the elephants of the Pavilion Hotel in Phuket, Thailand, where one of the most popular attractions is elephant rides. As many as eight people on one elephant, first into the surrounding forest, then down to the beach, to lunch at a fresh water lagoon, then back to the hotel. "Our nine elephants," writes Pavilion Hotel Group manager Jim France, "are kept chained to in-ground posts, not because they need to be, but because it makes the tourists feel better because their children seem safe from a tromping when they're feeding the beasts."

"About twenty minutes before the first wave of the recent Tsunami hit, the elephants became extremely agitated and unruly. Four had just returned from a trip and their handler's had not yet chained them. In a desperate panic, the four elephants helped the other five tear free from their chains. They all then climbed a hill and started bellowing. Many people followed them up the hill. Then the waves hit."

"After the waves subsided, the elephants charged down from the hill, and started picking up children with their trunks and running them back up the hill. When all the children were taken care of, they started helping the adults."

"God's elephants" rescued forty-two people that day. Then, they returned to the beach and carried up four dead bodies, including one of a child.

Not until the task was done did they allow their handlers to mount them. Then, with handlers atop, they began moving wreckage.

So remember, whatever God makes, He cherishes, including elephants, sparrows, and you. Especially you!

This is the God I believe in.

It is true that many believe Christianity to be the way of "requirements and rewards," to use Marcus Borg's phrase. It is the primary faith I grew up with and the primary way our culture sees Christianity. Believe the right thing and get the good stuff. In this understanding there are requirements that must be met to be a Christian. The beliefs that we must believe are various depending on the tradition. But they all lead to a God who judges

the quick (living) and the dead to either heaven or hell, a Jesus who's primary mission was to have people believe that he was and is God. You know the requirements from your own history. And the reward for those who could believe these requirements was God's help in life and the promise of eternal life in heaven.

But I cannot accept this understanding of Christianity, of Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. It is too punitive and doesn't bear up to my experience or thought.

I am captured by the God who is love. I am captured, body and soul by the Jesus who having faced the true depth of evil in the world by facing Satan, now goes into the world to teach of the God of compassion and justice, to heal the sick and to call for social justice.

It is to this God that I give my loyalty. It is this God who I understand to be the creator of all that is, the Christ redeemer of all that fails, and the Holy Spirit of all healing, body and soul, self and world.

And you should know that in my faith, by belief, trust and living of God in my life, I see each of you as God's beloved. And I see every suffering child of God as my brother and sister who offer me an opportunity to be of comfort as best I can, however I can. And when I fail, as I often do, I hear God say I am forgiven. And when you fail, as you do and will, I know God has forgiven you. And the joy of my life is in loving others as God loves me. And I believe that to be the joy of your life, the life of all living things, and even the life of the quark and the amoeba. God is love.

Shalom and Amen.