

26.7.19 “Beyond Belief to Belonging” - Rev. Dr. Adam Hange
Acts 15:1-11

Over the past few years, I’ve noticed something interesting in our New Members classes and Confirmation classes. There is a subtle disconnect between the words we say as our weekly welcome—and the words we say during those rituals of initiation.

We start our Sunday services by saying, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey..." implying it's okay if you're still figuring out what you believe. It's warm. It's inviting. It feels like an open door.

But then when it comes time to join the church, we read a list of vows—belief statements. And suddenly, the language shifts. Whether out of habit or tradition, we recite words that sound **remarkably** certain*

I know our membership covenant and baptismal vows aren't technically creeds, but they can sound a lot like they are. We say, "I believe..." in unison, while internally wondering, *"Wait, do I? What does that even mean?"*

It got me thinking: Where do these statements come from? Why were they formed? And how did they get passed down to us, generation after generation, like precious heirlooms we're afraid to even touch?

My friend and colleague, Episcopal priest Rev. Robert Voyle, once offered a brilliant insight that helps explain this tension. He said that the Creeds are a Greek answer to a Greek problem.

Think about it. The early church was trying to articulate the mystery of Jesus Christ using the philosophical tools available at the time—specifically, Platonic and Aristotelian logic. These philosophies demanded certainty. They required clear definitions and logical consistency. If something wasn't defined precisely, it was considered chaotic or false. So, when the Early Church needed to communicate

who Jesus was, they reached for the most rigorous intellectual framework they had. They created statements that were logically tight and intellectually defensible. The Creeds weren't just spiritual affirmations; they were philosophical solutions designed to satisfy a culture that valued certainty above all else.

Historically, the creeds were part of the rite of initiation, which we call Baptism. Baptism, ritual washing with water, predates John the Baptist. It predates Jesus. In the early church, it was done—in the wild—as we read last week in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch from Acts 8. Philip meets him on a desert road, explains the scripture, and bam—water. No book of worship to follow. No creed or approved liturgy. Just grace.

But... *well*, you start letting "just anyone in," and pretty soon, those in positions of authority and privilege will start to.... *voice their concern*.

That is something of what we read about in our text today, Acts 15. Peter's vision and his befriending of Cornelius, a tanner, had opened the door to the Gentiles—to all people!

This "open door" policy only became **more** extravagant once Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and others took the gospel across the Mediterranean. Suddenly, all these people who ate differently, dressed differently, lived and spoke, differently—were claiming to be followers of Jesus.

So, a big meeting is called in Jerusalem. James, the brother of Jesus. Simon Peter. The rest of the Twelve. They gather to decide: Are all Gentiles really welcome? The answer they initially propose is: Yes—but only if they can assimilate. Only if they learn to practice the Law of Moses, as we have practiced it. Meaning no shellfish or pork, abstaining from work one day a week, and... (gulp)... circumcision.

Think about that. Circumcision would make Gentile men visibly different from their friends in the Roman baths. It would mark them as outsiders in their own

culture. The proposal wasn't just theological; it was cultural coercion. It said, "You can belong to Jesus, but you must first become like us."

Now, I need to say, the author of Acts "throws some shade" at a group of former Pharisees, but let's be fair—they were not the judgmental stereotype we sometimes make them out to be. And this is not a slam on the Jewish people. This conversation is within the circle of Christ-followers—the disciples—arguing amongst themselves over whether they should be more liberal in their inclusion or conservative in their practice. Whether they should "throw out" the rule book, or carefully consult their constitution and bylaws.

Have you ever been in a meeting like that? One group feels like the rules are an obstacle to overcome, blocking the mission. Another group feels like the rules are the only thing standing between us and total chaos. Both sides love Jesus. Both sides want the church to thrive. But they disagree fiercely on what that looks like.

When you zoom out on human history, the story of Belief is a story of creating circles of belonging, holding to them tightly... until they no longer fit, and then recreating new circles of belonging that fit better. That is the Early Church. That is the Monastic Rule. That is the Reformation. That is the Enlightenment. We make rules. We break them. We remake them when they no longer suit us well*

It helps to understand why the beliefs eventually hardened into the Creeds we know today. It wasn't until Emperor Constantine brought Christianity "in from the cold" and made it an imperial religion that the church needed to create strict "orthodoxy."

For, you see, Empire can only tolerate "so much" diversity. It prefers uniformity. Every empire prefers subjects who think alike, who march in step, who don't ask too many questions. Empires will permit a small amount of diversity UNTIL it threatens their power. Then they use religion to separate and subjugate a few for the "good of the many." The Creeds became tools of political control, defining

who was "in" and who was "out," who was loyal to Caesar, or the Pope, or the Church, and who was a heretic.

This is precisely why the United Church of Christ is not a creedal church. We saw how creeds were used and misused by the powerful to protect some, while oppressing others, and said, no thank you.

In the UCC we receive the historic creeds and confessions of our ancestors as "testimonies, but not tests of the faith."

Because we've seen how they have been used as tests of faith, and we know that path does not lead to life or flourishing.

Earlier this week, I did a little exercise in our weekly Bible study where I read the Apostles' then the Nicene Creed, and asked folks to raise their hands whenever they heard something about which they were skeptical—or uncertain. Hands went up. More than once! Someone hesitated at the word "Father." Another at "born of the Virgin Mary." Another paused at language around the Trinity. And you know what? That's okay.

Someone once said, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; in all things, charity." It's a turn of phrase that has been used to unite Christians over the centuries. The challenge, of course, is always determining whose list of essentials? And how diverse is too diverse? And, of course, remembering any charity at all.

These days, I don't think we're particularly concerned with the mechanics of the virgin birth, or whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think we are more concerned about who is welcomed, and who is excluded. Whose culture is celebrated, and who is told they must assimilate.

Isn't it amazing, 2000 years later, and we're still sorting out the same kinds of challenges that Jerusalem council faced.

I will say this about the UCC. It's not perfect, but we refuse to let the Church become another arm of the Empire. We reject the idea that faith is a static set of propositions that closes the door on new understandings of the divine. For we believe, deep in our DNA, that there is always more light yet to break forth from God's holy Word* - (John Robinson, Mayflower)

If we lock ourselves into a single creed, formal or informal, we stop listening. We assume we have captured the infinite God in a finite sentence. But the Spirit is alive, and the Spirit is moving.

I believe our faith survives because someone, somewhere, decided the old boxes were too small for the God they knew. We are a denomination born of bursting boxes. We hold to the centrality of individual conscience because we know God is still speaking—and God's voice doesn't always match our hymnals, or our language, or our latest political agendas.

As people of faith, and citizens of this country, I believe we would do well to remember the lessons of Acts 15. Peter reminds the council: "God... made no distinction between us and them." James adds: Who are we to argue with the Spirit?

This asks us to tune into our own conscience and expect the Spirit to "blow where it wishes," rather than abiding by the boxes we—or the Empire—build. If you haven't had a box burst in your generation, you're due. The Spirit is always doing new things.

Perhaps the Still-Speaking Spirit of God is inviting us to treat our historic beliefs not as walls, but as maps. Cherished maps, showing us where previous travelers found water, but also maps which we are free to redraw as we discover new territories of grace.

Perhaps we are invited to prioritize orthopraxy—right living—over orthodoxy—right believing. To care less about agreeing with every clause and more about feeding the hungry and sheltering the stranger.

There's a song in *The Greatest Showman* called "Love Is an Open Door." It captures something profound: "Together we can figure it out." Faith isn't about having all the answers; it's about keeping the door ajar. It's an open heart that invites curiosity, doubt, and even disagreement into the shared space of worship. So, what is your "This I Believe"? Not the one written in stone, but the one lived out in daily choices. How do you co-create belonging in a world demanding conformity?

In closing, let me say, you don't have to have it all together to belong here. You don't have to believe in the same ways we do.

Just show up as you are. Uncertain. Curious. Open-hearted and ready to see where the Spirit shows up next.

I hope that the time spent with us - changes us for the better, so we can go out into our communities, and live differently.

As we do...

May we be free from fear. May we be free from hatred. May we be free from suffering. May we live with joy.

And may we extend the peace we find, whether from belief or belonging,

to everyone we meet. No matter what they believe.

Let the Church say... Amen.