

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year B + March 4, 2018

Perhaps you've heard the story about the convert who gathered some people from his church community at a nearby river for his baptism. The pastor stood next to him, waist high in the water, and asked him, "Do you believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?" He said, "I do." He went under the water and there the pastor held him for a good long time. He came up from the water a little exasperated while trying to catch his breath. Then the pastor asked him if he believed everything the church taught about God. "I do," he replied and went under the water again with the pastor keeping him there under the water for a good long time. Finally, as he rose up gasping for air, the pastor invited him to speak. "Now, tell us in your own words what you believe?" The fellow looked at him and said, "I believe, sir that you are trying to drown me."

If you've been baptized in the big tub at the Easter Vigil or surrounded those who have, you know something of the power of full immersion baptism. Now, Pastor Van Kley and I promise to never hold people underwater for too long, but the people being baptized are under water long enough to know that baptism is a kind of drowning – dying to an old way of living and, rising up out of the waters into a new way of living with a new community and a new allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Those entering the waters state their allegiance publicly. Just before taking the plunge, they are asked to state what they believe.

You've noticed, haven't you, that the new believer says what he or she believes, but not in their own words. Instead, they've been given the words to say.

To the question, "What do you believe?" those entering into life in Christ respond with the Apostle's Creed. And each does not respond alone but is joined by the surrounding community. We say what we believe together. It is our common creed, shared with Christians all over the world and through the ages. Like a family heirloom, it has been handed down to us. With the Apostle's Creed we state what we believe with one another and with our ancestors.

Today the copies of the Creed are presented to our WAY candidates as a gift with a bright ribbon tied in a bow - passing on the family heirloom as a treasured gift.

Does that surprise you a little bit? To see the Creed spoken at baptism as a gift?

I'll be honest with you, when first introduced to the Creed, I did not see it as a gift. I was a Confirmation student in seventh or eighth grade. I did not see the Creed as a gift but more like an exam. Something I had to memorize and, along with the ancient words, Luther's explanation of each article from the *Small Catechism*. That's not all bad, but at

the time it felt less like a gift and more like a test. I breathed a sigh of relief when I passed.

I appreciate it now as a gift because it tells a sacred story and places us in that very story. It says, too, that your identity and my identity have been given to us. Given to us in love and a reminder that we are part of something greater than self.

I know that flies in the face of the modern impulse. We hold to a notion of freedom that says you can believe whatever you want to believe. More than hold to it, we sort of celebrate it.

Many years ago, the sociologist Robert Bellah wrote a book called *Habits of the Heart*. It included an interview with someone named Sheila. When asked about religious belief she said, "I believe in God. I can't remember the last time I went to church ... but my faith has carried me along ... I call it Sheilism. Just my own little voice."

Since then, "Sheilism" has been catchword to describe much of religious life in America. In Seattle it means, "I'm spiritual, not religious."

Do you see, though, how the faith community is a different breed of cat? A counter-cultural one. The sentiment of being "spiritual but not religious" is attractive because it does not tie us to a community or a commitment. Nor are we tied to a common story or common narrative when we have nothing other than our own "little voice."

Now, freedom of expression and thought is something to be treasured. For sure. In fact, we celebrate a diversity of gifts in the church and that includes diverse theologies. We may say the same Creed while holding to different interpretations of scripture or differ in the ways we think about God. Why, even your pastors don't agree on everything. And how cool is that?

Sharing a common belief is not about a common way of thinking. To say "I believe" together and with our ancestors is to commit ourselves to life within the wondrous triune God. To believe is to follow Jesus and dwell in Christ.

To say "I believe" is to say "I trust."

I've often wondered if, instead of asking, "Do you believe in God" at the font, the question should sound something like this: "Who do you trust?" or "In whom do you place your trust?" And isn't this call to trust the very foundation of the covenants to which God calls us as has called us through the ages?

It is at the heart of the Ten Commandments. How does it begin? "I am the Lord your God." And what follows are ways for God's people to live. To keep Sabbath. To honor

those you love. And to invest heavily into the well-being of your neighbor. God calls us to relationship. Righteousness isn't about right thinking but about being in right relationship.

God says "Trust me." Trust me.

Far from an individual creed, the commandments draw us into a common vision and a common way of life.

When Jesus gets all worked up and cleanses the Temple, he is turning over idols of misplaced trust. God's people had forgotten the covenant and the call to trust. The temple had become a venue for something other than the well-being of the neighbor.

God's consistent and persistent plea is this: "Trust me. Trust me." And why? Why should we trust this God?

Well, go back to the introduction to the Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, WHO brought you out of Egypt and out of the house of slavery..."

God is to be trusted not because of what God has done. This is the God who delivers us from slavery and death and brings freedom. There's good reason to trust, to believe in this God.

In these 40 days, God calls us to cleanse our hearts. We plead with God to cleanse us again. We ask God to cleanse us from misplaced trust and to trust God anew just as Jesus once cleansed the Temple. Only now, Jesus has become the temple, stricken down and raised again; and responding from that place of passionate love, he restores us not in a fit of fury, but in the precious gift of forgiveness. Amen.