

Sunday, February 6, 2022

Rev. Robert W. Brown

**SERMON**

***From Believing to Knowing: Nurturing a vibrant faith***

I Corinthians 15:1-11

**INTRODUCTION:**

In the New Testament, the Book of Acts follows the Gospels. Acts continues to chronicle the events that happened after the resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent emergence of what came to be called Christianity. Shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples experienced a profound mystical event. They were filled with a spiritual power greater than they could imagine. The Holy Spirit gave them understanding, courage and unbridled passion. They took to the streets and told the story of what they experienced and saw following the radical ways of Jesus, they spoke of the horror of his sacrificial death and astonishing wonder and awe of his resurrection. Somehow, the good news of this Gospel story penetrated the souls of many who heard it. Quite suddenly people were struck with profound spiritual insight into God's amazing grace and unconditional love for them. This was a message not only for Jews. Everyone was welcome; Hebrews and Greeks, foreigners and Romans, rich and poor, slaves and slave owners. Everyone who believed this remarkable story suddenly knew the power of forgiveness and God's acceptance. Filled with the goodness of the Holy Spirit, thousands of people were compelled to live in alignment with the teachings of Jesus. In chapter 2 we read, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." The first Christian community was formed and it was heaven on earth...for about 20 minutes. Almost immediately it began to break down. A married couple was found cheating the "shared proceeds" agreement. Others began arguing over correct religious practices. Some of the leaders were actually arrested and imprisoned for disrupting the local economy and competing religious institutions reviled and slandered this radical renegade cult. To publicly profess Christ was to risk ridicule, violence and even death. It turned out that following in the Way of Jesus and establishing a new kind of society around his teachings was dangerous and costly.

But these early converts were more than just believers of a message or prescribed doctrine. Something deep inside them changed the way they viewed God and God's relationship with humanity. They began to actually experience the liberating goodness of life together when God dwelled among them. For these early Christians there was no turning back. Against all odds, they continued on, knowing the grace and blessing of God, even under severe persecution and social/political opposition.

Years later, as the startup struggled to organize and take root, a man named Paul experienced a similar dramatic conversion and began to travel from city to city, establishing small churches before moving on to the next one. This amazing adventure is all chronicled in the Book of Acts. (The Wednesday night Bible Study Group has just begun reading it.)

Corinth was one of the cities where Paul established a group of believers, and wouldn't you know, as soon as he left things went sideways, fast. Divisive factions began to form. There were power plays in the leadership, betrayals, violent arguments, immorality and general chaos. Welcome to church! Paul hears of this and urgently fires off letters to the Corinthian church, hoping to bring some sense into them. Sadly, many of these letters are lost to us today but two remain. Last week, Gail talked about chapter 13 of First Corinthians, where Paul brilliantly explains how love is supposed to behave. He insists that, above all things, love is primary.

Today I'd like to move on to Chapter 15. Here Paul gives us a pure and clear distillation of, not only what Christians believe, but more to the point, what Christians must experience. For the church to survive, it is critical to move from simply believing to knowing, because to know God directly and deeply will change everything.

Hear this reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. 15:1-11.

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### **SCRIPTURE:**

Paul writes,

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

The Word of God for the people of God.

### **PRAYER**

*Loving God, you meet us in our struggle to understand you fully and generously give us experiences of your goodness and loving-kindness. Reveal yourself to us today, so that we may know you directly and deeply, as we follow in the Way of Jesus. AMEN.*

**SERMON** *From Believing to Knowing:* Nurturing a vibrant faith

Paul distills the central tenants of our faith in one sentence. “*Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.*” Everybody brought up in any Christian church learned those words early on in Sunday school. But what does it really mean to believe them? Can this abstract idea become an experience we come to really know? Can you just will yourself into believing more? Is that what faith is? It that what God is asking of us? How is it that some people seem to be all in while others struggle? Is it merely that belief is synonymous with faith or is there more to it?

We recently finished up a 6-part study group called Christianity 101. I taught about the essential, commonly held beliefs that define Christianity and we discussed various theories and theologies that emerged throughout history. We talked about faith and doubt, the authority of scripture and various ways to approach the Bible. We covered how Christians commonly think of God, Jesus, the crucifixion, resurrection, the doctrine of the Trinity. There were great discussions about our personal views, what we’ve been taught, and how our understanding has changed and is always changing. For our final session, I asked everyone to write a brief statement of faith, articulating how they personally understand the nature of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It’s not an easy task and it got even harder when I asked them to read it out loud to the class. It was quite a memorable evening for me. Each one of us courageously talked about how we understand the nature of God through the lens of the Gospel and also the places we struggle with faith.

I was impressed with the thoughtfulness, transparency and honesty each one brought to their faith statement. Also, what I noticed, even in this small class, there was a wide spectrum of convictions and beliefs. This made me quite happy because that’s the kind of church community I want to be a part of; people honestly engaged and seriously grappling with how God is or isn’t present in our life and allowing for other points of view. It was interesting to notice that all of us came to our current state of believing based largely on our personal experiences; how and where we were raised, the events that shaped our early years, the trials and victories of young adulthood, the magic moments we encountered, births, deaths, our triumphs and failures. Everything we experience in life contributes to our understanding of who God is.

Every disappointment, struggle, infirmity, betrayal, loss and reversal we live through informs the way we relate to God. It would seem that the framing of our faith and understanding about God is not only based on scripture and tradition but also our faith, or lack of faith is largely supported by our experiences. What we know more than what we believe.

To believe is a choice. We choose whether or not to accept what we hear, see or read. We may believe what we read on the internet, but we really can't know it for certain. The people who heard the disciples tell their story of Jesus chose to believe them. The founding members of the first Corinthian church chose to believe what Paul taught them, "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." But to know is a very different thing. Paul writes about how there were multiple eyewitness testimonies of Jesus appearing after he was crucified. Even Paul himself was converted by an undeniable experience he had when Jesus appeared to him. These people know that Christ was resurrected because of first hand awareness.

Believing is about what we think, knowing is about our experience. A belief is an idea, or a conviction, that may not be universally true. Beliefs are faith-based assumptions, which very well may change over time. We develop or adopt a belief either because someone we trust tells us to, or the Bible seems to say it, or reason supports it. But until we've experienced it, it remains only a possibility, a speculation. We should be very careful if we think what we believe is an absolute certainty. What *may* be true, what we *think* is possible, should always be held very lightly. When I was a kid, I really believed those x-ray glasses advertised in the back of my comic book worked, but now I know they don't. Such a disappointment!

But knowing is something different. Knowing is not an idea; it is an experience. If someone punches me, I don't believe they punched me, I know it. I experienced it. It's tactile through my senses, not simply a thought I have. No one can debate whether or not I've been punched. I know it.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about what he knows, "*By the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*" This is not a belief; it is his lived experience. He is not debating it. Until we actually experience our own connection

with God, we are simply choosing to believe what other people tell us. That's not enough, I think God wants us to move from believing to knowing. If believing is the menu then knowing is the meal. We can read the menu our whole lives believing how good it is but God's desire is for us to savor the meal.

Throughout our lives we have real experiences that will change what we believe. (x-ray glasses) When that happens, we are forced to change our view. Pay attention to your experiences as they relate to your belief and understanding of God. It's not always easy to change beliefs you have held for years. Generally, it is a humbling experience to admit you were wrong. But changing our minds is what this life journey is all about, this is what our faith journey is all about. Growth never happens until we have the courage to move out of the comfort of a narrow belief system when the evidence and experience point elsewhere. There is no growth in certainty. What we believe should always risk the possibility of a more expansive, deeper understanding. After all, what is really true will always be true everywhere. What is true will hold up and even be strengthened by our doubts and hard questions. But, when we know, when we experience something directly, it becomes our indisputable story. "I was lost, but now I see."

So often we are prone to think of faith as an abstraction, an idea more than a lived experience. I think that our faith in God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit is not really about mustering up a belief as much as it is about acceptance; acceptance of beauty, acceptance of love, acceptance of grace and forgiveness, acceptance of the fact that we are accepted and worthy of God's affection. Acceptance unlocks the door to interpreting our experiences. And then, the Bible, the tradition, our reason and experience all form a faith that directly comes to know God in deeper and deeper ways.

What is your statement of faith? What do you believe and what do you really know? How have your beliefs changed throughout the years? What beliefs have become knowledge through lived experiences? This is the life of faith that continually seeks understanding and how much better it is to savor the meal than ponder the menu.