

What I Came to Do

Isaiah 40:21-31

Crossroads Christian Church

Mark 1:29-39

February 8, 2015

Epiphany 5B

When I was preparing for ministry, I thought for a while that I would end up being a teacher of church history. Even after God changed my course to point me toward pastoral ministry, I've always loved studying history. So today I'm going to start off with a little church history lesson. The subject is one that Disciples have sometimes used as a bulls-eye in the past--creeds.

A creed is a statement of faith, usually an official one that represents the beliefs of a particular denomination or branch of Christianity. The word "creed" comes from the Latin Credo, meaning "I believe." Back in the early centuries of Christianity, people would come up with new ideas, new interpretations of the Christian faith. Sometimes they were off base from what the rest of the community believed. So a church council might debate the different beliefs, and vote on what was really good, sound, orthodox Christianity and what was heresy—then they would write a creed that would help people understand what the official theology of the church was.

Many centuries after that, during the Protestant Reformation, New churches sprung up. How could you tell the difference between a Lutheran, a Calvinist, a Zwinglian, or an Anabaptist? Different branches of the church developed their own statements of faith, or creeds, and their members had to learn these creeds and be able to recite them from memory, and accept their teachings in order to be members in good standing. So, creeds defined the theologies of different churches. If you were a Scottish or English Presbyterian, you accepted the Westminster Confession. And if one group of Presbyterians broke off from another, then the new group might add its own creed to state the differences in belief.

So, 200 years ago, people belonging to all these state churches and independent churches in Europe all started to come to this new country to begin new lives—but they

brought their old ways of worshiping with them, including their creeds. Alexander and Thomas Campbell were two that came over, but they realized that carrying the old church arguments with them from the old country wasn't the best way to be Christian in the new world. They saw little groups of Presbyterians carrying their old rivalries with them, and not allowing one another to take communion, unless they all agreed on one creed or the other. You see, creeds had become tests of faith, and ways of shutting out other Christians as wrong, or heretics.

The Campbells, and also Barton Stone, decided that since the Bible didn't mention creeds, we didn't need them. They were a human invention that just caused grief and hostility. What was more important was the unity we all had in Jesus Christ. So a saying that grew up with the Disciples was, "No creeds but Christ, no book but the Bible." By the way, that doesn't mean that we don't read any books but the Bible, it just means that we don't have to accept official books of church doctrine or governance in order to be church members.

Today, most of the churches that used to use creeds as tests of membership or fellowship have changed their attitudes. They still use creeds in worship, but don't use them to say, "if you don't believe every word of this, you're not one of us." Sometimes creeds have their place. They are often beautiful expressions of faith that really do help us understand what it means to be a Christian. As a matter of fact, sometimes Disciples congregations will use one in a worship service, just because they are rich in meaning. If you have a Chalice Hymnal handy, find page 355, and browse over the next 6 pages, and you'll see what some of them look like.

When I worked with a United Church of Christ congregation, we would say the Apostle's Creed almost every Sunday. It was important to their heritage. You didn't have to accept every word of it to be a member, but they loved it and found it valuable. And I didn't mind saying it right along with them. It's one of the oldest creeds—you'll

see it on page 359. It describes belief in God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and the church as an expression of that Holy Spirit. One thing that I didn't like about it, though, was one big jump it took. It covers the whole life and ministry of Jesus Christ with a comma. "I believe in Jesus Christ who was born of the Virgin Mary COMMA and suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried."

Today's gospel lesson, just a few brief verses from the first chapter of Mark, helps fill in the gap. We believe in Jesus Christ—who was Jesus Christ, why did he come, and what did he do while he was here? In these verses we can find out. As a matter of fact, in one of these verses, he said, "This is what I came to do."

Jesus came to bring the good news of a whole new way of relating to God and living with one another as God's children. He called it the Kingdom of God, or the reign of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven. It means living heavenly on this earth, just as God intends us to do in heaven—that's why it says in the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We've never quite arrived at the kingdom yet, but we're still a colony of God's rule right here in this troubled world. So Jesus came to get this started. He began with healing. His disciple Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and she woke up refreshed, as from a nap, and got busy with her ordinary work. The crowds had heard of his healings, and they pushed their way around Peter's home, each with their own plea, but each the same. Heal me. Help me. Heal my child, my spouse, my friend. Drive out the evil which haunts my life. And Jesus responded, his healing touch bringing health and wholeness, forgiveness and peace. Finally, late at night, after the crowds went away for rest, he walked out into the countryside, to find a quiet place, under the starlit sky, to recharge, to refill his tank, to talk with God. But after awhile, the disciples came to check on him, and to tell him that the crowds, the needy crowds, had gathered again. The disciples

felt guilty. Should we bother him while he was praying? But he responded to their need with his great, loving heart, and said, "This is what I came to do," and went back to the pressing throng.

Christina Berry puts it this way.
We ourselves search for him.
We seek the savior, the promised one.
We want to be healed. We bring our demons and ask him to deliver us.
We ask him to take our hands and lift us up and out of our fevers.
We come with our sore places, our broken places,
Our blindness, Our deafness, Our inability to speak.
And we say, "Lord, lord, can you heal me?"

And he does. He reaches out with healing love, and lifts us up.
We may not find ourselves cured of an illness But we are healed.
Maybe the cancer doesn't go away,
But we learn to love the moments of life that we have.
Maybe the cardiologist still plans to do bypass surgery,
But Jesus heals our broken hearts.
Maybe the prognosis for us is poor, and we face death
But Jesus heals us so that we find ourselves facing life, until our deaths.
Because, you see,
Jesus doesn't just heal diseases.
He heals people.
Jesus doesn't just heal diseases.
He heals people
Everyone.¹ (unquote)

And that's why he came—to heal not just individuals but a hurting world. And we are called to be his disciples, helping as we can. It isn't about creeds, it's about

¹ As posted on Midrash.org

compassion. It isn't about doctrine, it's about faith in God's love. It isn't about being conservative or liberal, it's about having generous and caring hearts, about living in this world as agents of God's good news. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon