**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC 3/22/15**

***Believe in the Light***

**A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent by the Rev. John M. Barrett**

**UNISON WORDS OF AFFIRMATION** Jeremiah 31:31-34

The Unison Words of Affirmation for this morning are from the Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is often thought of as a prophet of doom and gloom, for he frequently announces that God will punish Israel for their faithlessness. Yet in these four verses for today, God is promising a new covenant, a new relationship, not based on obedience but on forgiveness. As Christians, we may see these verses as foreshadowing God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ, God’s writing the law of love on our hearts.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** John 12:20-33

Today’s Gospel Witness is once again from the Gospel of John. This story is unique to John’s Gospel, and John puts the story in a prominent place. In John’s narrative, these events happen after Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

**SERMON**

We can’t really tell from this story if the Greeks at the festival of Passover are able to meet Jesus or not. The Greeks are most polite and rather than approaching Jesus themselves, they tell one of his disciples, Philip, that they wish to see Jesus.

Philip doesn’t know what to tell them, so he asks Andrew about the Greeks' request, and then both Philip and Andrew go and tell Jesus that some Greeks would like to meet him.

Jesus doesn’t say yes or no to the proposed meeting. Instead of giving an answer, and this is often the case in the Gospel of John, Jesus goes into a discourse, a mini-sermon about his coming death and its meaning for the world.

If you put the story into its context --- that Jesus has just ridden the donkey into Jerusalem, with the crowds waving palms and shouting loud Hosanna’s, you might imagine Jesus being tired and thinking, ‘Now what do these guys want?’

And so instead of meeting the Greeks and asking them what they want to know, Jesus addresses the crowd, which may in fact have included the Greeks, if they were smart enough to follow Philip and Andrew when they went to speak to Jesus.

But whether or not the Greeks are able to see Jesus doesn’t really matter to us. Why? Because their seeing him doesn’t matter to Jesus.

Most likely the Greeks want to meet Jesus and to speak with him in order to decide for themselves whether or not the claims being made that he is the long-awaited Messiah, and the Son of God, are true. The Greeks want to know if they can believe him and believe in him. They want proof. They want to be convinced.

But at this point, Jesus knows that it is not important for anyone to meet him, for his teaching days are over. Jerusalem will be his last stop. In a few short days Jesus knows that he will say goodbye to his disciples in an Upper Room, be tried by Pontius Pilate, crucified by an angry crowd, buried in a tomb hewn out of rock, and then be resurrected, appearing to Mary Magdalene and his disciples before ascending into heaven. Fifty days later, the Holy Spirit will come as tongues of fire at Pentecost, inspiring the disciples and others gathered together in Jerusalem, to become the Church, the Church of Jesus Christ.

So the Greeks don’t need to meet Jesus, for his death is at hand, as are his resurrection and the birthday of the Church at Pentecost.

Jesus tells the crowd all that they need to know, which is all that we need to know too: We need to know that in death, Jesus will be glorified, as God glorifies God’s own name. For as a grain of wheat dies in the earth, it bears much fruit. As we die to sin, we gain the fruit of life eternal. In serving Jesus we follow him; where he is, we will be also, and in serving Jesus, God will honor us.

Our earthly death is not easy to confront, not easy even to think about. If the prospect of death troubles Jesus’ soul, it surely troubles our souls as well. But Jesus stands tall, and realizes that he need not ask God to save him from his trial, but that it is for this trial that Jesus has come to this hour.

And as importantly, Jesus says that when he is lifted up from the earth, whether on the cross or at the ascension after his resurrection, people will be drawn to him, knowing God and gaining eternal life in God’s kingdom without end.

What Jesus is saying is that it is not what you see that is important. It is not even important that you see him. What is important is what you know. As Jeremiah prophesized, it is what is written on our hearts that matters; and what is written on our heart through our faith is God’s law, God’s law of love.

And it seems to me that Jesus is making a distinction, or at least I would like to make a distinction, between seeing Jesus and having faith in him, a distinction between belief and faith. Beliefs are ideas or events or facts, depending on your point of view. Over the centuries, the Christian Church has bundled beliefs together, beliefs taken from the Bible and Church tradition, bringing the separate beliefs into statements of belief called creeds.

In some churches, although not the United Church of Christ, you must believe in the creed to have your child baptized or to become a church member as an adult.

The most ancient creed that Christians use today is the Apostles’ Creed. It is called the Apostles’ Creed because according to tradition, there was one belief contributed by each of the twelve apostles, Jesus’ disciples.

These are the beliefs of the Apostles’ Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,

Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven,

and is seated at the right hand of the Father,

He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic Church, (the Church Universal)

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting.

That’s quite a bundle of beliefs, twelve or more, depending on how you count them.

How many of them do you believe? All of them? Half of them? Some of them?

I recently read about an Episcopal Church where the Rector (which is their Senior Minister) has people demonstrate their faith once a year. Everyone stands for the recitation of the Apostles’ Creed, just as we do for our UCC Statement of Faith. But on this one particular Sunday of the year, the Rector asks his church members to sit down whenever they come to something in the creed that they don’t believe. Then they are to stand the next time there is something that they do believe.

The Rector said that it is really amazing in that people are sitting down and getting up at different times for their different beliefs. There is always someone standing or sitting. The people rise and fall like uneven waves on the shore. And the Rector’s point, I believe, is that you don’t have to believe the entire Apostles’ Creed at once. Parts of the Apostles’ Creed might speak to you more at one time in your life than another, as you travel your life and faith journey.

In the United Church of Christ, believing our entire Statement of Faith is not a requirement for membership.

Our Statement of Faith contains many of the ideas of the Apostles’ Creed, but we state that God is still speaking and acting in the world, and that Jesus suffers and is victorious with us. In other words our UCC Statement of Faith is more personal and contemporary, proclaiming what God does rather than what God did.

Our UCC Statement of Faith states: “*God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.”*

Our UCC Statement of Faith also reminds us that God calls us to action:

 *“God calls us into the church*

 *to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,*

 *to be God’s servants in the service of others,*

 *to proclaim the gospel to all the world,*

 *and resist the powers of evil,*

 *to share in Christ’s baptism and eat as his table,*

 *to join him in his passion and victory.”*

I always have resonated with the UCC bumper sticker that reads, “To believe is to do.” “To believe is to do” is the United Church of Christ in a nutshell.

It’s not what we believe that matters. What matters is that our belief gives us a faith foundation for action. What we believe gives us a faith foundation to live in the world, to act in the world as a follower of Jesus, living and acting with the love of God written on our hearts.

It is not so much what we believe, but rather, that we believe. That we believe is what matters. This is what Jesus wanted the Greeks to understand: “You don’t need to meet me. Only believe, and your faith will follow.”

Only believe and your faith will follow.

Your faith is what matters.

Your faith is what is written on your heart.

St. Augustine said, “Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.”

And as we say in the United Church of Christ, “To believe is to do.”

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE** *What Wondrous Love Is This*

**BENEDICTION**

And now let us walk with faith the path God is setting before us, inspired by the love of God, renewed by the presence of Jesus Christ, and empowered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, both this day and even forevermore. Amen.

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