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“This We Believe”

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Song of Solomon 2:8–13; Psalm 15; Mark 7:1–8, 14–19

God our Redeemer, who called your Church to witness that you were in Christ pursuing the world which you love, help us to proclaim the good news of your love, that all who hear it may become members of your beloved community. Amen.

As a child, I remember the verbal barbs that used to fly
from the mouths of “innocents” on the school playground,
and the sing-song rebuttal we used to deflect such barbs:

“Sticks and stones may break my bones,
but words will never hurt me.”

Of course that’s totally untrue.

Words do have the power to hurt, incredibly so.

Words have the power to hurt more than sticks or stones.

But words also have the power to heal.

Sticks and stones may break our bones,
but words can miraculously heal us.

This we believe, as evidenced by our word-filled worship,
our word-filled prayers, our word-filled funerals and
our word-filled fellowships.

Words act as both benediction and blessing.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory,

full of grace and truth.

We, as people of faith, as people of The Book, as people
of the Word made flesh, are never at a loss for words, it seems.

Jesus, the Word, knows this, as his words reflect his faith.

In today's Gospel lesson, the Pharisees have been taking critical note
of the table manners of Jesus and his disciples.

And they have given them demerits, red-lettered X's for being dirty,
for failing to wash their hands before eating;
and even worse, for being disrespectful of the Jewish customs, the law.

They wrap their disdain into a tight question
and fling it at Jesus and company like this:

"Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders
instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

It's in the form of a question, but it might as well be a direct accusation:

"You're dirty. You don't play by *our* rules, and we don't like you!
Who do you think you are?"

And Jesus, to his credit, hears them out and then delivers his own salvo.

His rage is palpable, as he peppers them with words from the prophet Isaiah,
and then continues to expound upon a wide range of topics
including the purity laws, the commandments,
the responsibility to parents, the anatomy of digestion,
and the foibles of the human heart.

We might call this a first-century town hall meeting,
where what is at stake is the identity of God's people.

Are we going to be clean-livers or a dirty rag-tag bunch?

Are we going to be law-abiding believers or renegades?
And Jesus becomes angry as the conversation becomes heated,
and accusations take on a personal tenor.
But he does not become violent or uncivil in his speech,
nor does he find it necessary to carry a weapon into this meeting.
He finds the words that reflect God's focus in this time of crisis.
What matters, he says, is not the cleanliness of one's hands,
but the condition of one's heart.
And what matters more, he says,
are not the religious trappings and traditions of humanity,
but the commands of God for the common good.
His words put the Pharisees in their place,
and they have no response to his retort. Touché.

In 1951, Edward R. Murrow began hosting a radio series
called *This I Believe*.

In its simple format, listeners were invited to write a few hundred words
expressing the core principles guiding their lives –
their personal credos.

They wrote of their most closely-held convictions
and then spoke them on the radio to an audience of millions,
and their earnest, exposed statements were acts of bravery.

If you've heard a recent segment of *This I Believe* on NPR,
you know that the little vignettes of wisdom culled from real life,
can be quite simple, yet quite profound.

And each vignette, each transparent sheet of words that allows us to
peer into the heart and soul of another human being,

serves as an invitation to each of us to make
that same attempt.

What do we believe? What is our credo? What words define who we are?

What values shape our speech and actions?

Studs Terkel, writing in the forward to a *This I Believe* anthology,
makes this statement as part of his credo.

"I secretly envy those who believe in the hereafter
and with it the idea that they may once again meet dear ones.

They cannot prove beyond a reasonable doubt that there is such a place.

Neither can they disprove it.

I cannot find the bookmaker willing to take my bet on it.

How will one who guesses right be able to collect his winnings?

So speaking on behalf of the bookies of the world,
all bets are off.

Maybe the poet Keats was right after all in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

He envied the fortunate youth who is forever chasing his love,
never quite catching her.

The pursuit is all," he says (NPR, *This I Believe*, p. xxi).

Maybe so, as the words bear witness in today's Old Testament reading
from Song of Songs.

Maybe, the lover *is* always pursuing the beloved;
maybe the wintered-down are always pursuing the Spring;
the silenced, the song;
the barren, the bloom.

"Spring is Christ," the Suffi poet Rumi once said;

“martyred plants rising up from their shrouds.”

Maybe God is always pursuing us.

And it is words that convey this pursuit. Words convey what we believe.

Words convey who we are. Words convey what we are striving for.

And as we begin anew another year of Christian nurture

and spiritual formation in this church,

at this non-conforming corner lot at the intersection

of Roxboro and Main,

on this one hundred and thirty-eighth year of our life as church,

this is what I believe...

I believe that we are incredibly good listeners here.

I believe that we attend well to God’s word;

that we listen with open hearts and open minds,

and that we respond to God’s word

with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength,

by acts of love to neighbor as self.

But I also believe that we need to learn to articulate our faith better.

If words have the power to heal; if words have the power to bring peace;

if words have the power to comfort;

if words have the power to bring righteous change,

then we need to wield our words wisely, and bring God’s

focus to bear upon situations that we can not longer bear.

This is why I think the word “evangelism” scares us so much,

because it strikes us in our Achilles heel, at one of our weakest spots,

the spot of articulating what it is we believe and why.

Theology is our God-language, and we need not only to hear and

understand our God-language like a second language,
but we also need to become fluent in our God-language
and speak up and sing out when we
find ourselves in situations of cultural exile.

To paraphrase Psalm 137, when the going gets tough,
we can either hang up our harps,
let our tongue cleave to the roof of our mouth,
or just act dumb, like we don't know what to sing or say.

Or... we can say what we believe.

But that requires learning just what it is we believe,
and practicing the articulation of our faith here, on friendly turf,
so that when we are out there, on not so friendly turf,
we also can say what we believe.

And then, perhaps, the word "evangelism" will not send us
scurrying in the opposite direction,
and we will become the bearers of God's good news,
in a world that is love-starved,
winter-sterile, silent, and barren.

God is pursuing the world, to love the world, to renew the world,
to recast the world in non-perishable form.

But we have to let the world know, that her lover is on the loose,
gazing through the window, peering through the lattice.

As we prepare to dedicate and commission our 52 Sunday School teachers
this morning,

I want to share a bit of wisdom from author Anne Lamotte,
about her efforts to start and run a Sunday School program at her church.

She said, "One secret of life is that the reason life works at all
is that not everyone in your tribe is nuts on the same day.
Another secret is that laughter is carbonated holiness."

(Anne Lamotte. *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, p. 66)

And with that in mind, this is my charge to you teachers,
and to you, their students.

Practice articulating what you believe.

Practice giving voice to your faith.

Teachers, teach us how to talk about what matters most to us.

Help us to be less afraid to speak about God and grace,
and more willing to honor our baptismal vows

by sharing the mysterious hope that is within us all.

And prepare us and send us out as Christ's articulate disciples,

as bearers of God's good word,

as Speakers of God's good truth,

and as witnesses to God's good love,

always with us in Jesus Christ, now and forever,

even to the end of the age. Amen.