

First Congregational United Church of Christ

“Matters of the Heart”

Mark 1:14-20

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“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God
has come near; repent, and believe in the good news”
(Mark 1:15).

What does it mean to believe? I want to begin with a little word study. This study cracked open this text in a new way for me. I hope that it will do the same for you.

Those of you familiar with Marcus Borg’s book *The Heart of Christianity* or with his new book *Speaking Christian* have seen or heard part of this before. I confess that I wanted to check his work, and, to see if that venerable source of truth about the English language, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, had any more to offer.

The Latin word “credo,” from which we derive the word “creed,” is commonly translated “I believe.” Hence, the concise statements of faith we refer to as creeds, the Apostle’s Creed, for example, which we used in today’s baptism. All of the creeds begin with the statement, “I believe.” Now, here is where things get cool. The word “believe” comes from a Teutonic root which means “to hold dear,” “to like,” even, “to love.” So, the primary meaning of the word “believe” is not to give intellectual assent to a body of information or to a series of theological precepts, but rather the primary meaning of the word “believe” is “to hold someone dear,” “to have confidence in a person,” “to trust a person,” “to have faith in a person” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, 1971, page 783). Belief has to do first with who, not what, you hold dear. Believing has to do with who you love or who you give your heart over to.

Now, “heart” is a word we need to spend a little time with principally because we narrowly define matters of the heart as having to do with emotion. That is ninth definition of “heart” in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, Volume 1, page 160). The first definition of heart is the physical muscle. The second is “the center of vital functions; the seat of life” (OED, Volume 1, page 159). The fifth definition of heart is “mind, in the widest sense, including the functions of feeling, volition (will), and intellect” (OED, Volume 1, page 159). The sixth definition identifies the heart as “the seat of ones most inmost thoughts and secret feelings; ones inmost being; the depths of the soul; the soul, the spirit” (OED, Volume 1, page 159). In case you are curious, there are 56 separate categories defining heart in the OED, so I’ll stop here, at least for now. Heart, then, for all intents and purposes, encompasses body, mind, will, spirit and emotion - the whole of and the depth of ones self.

So you see it matters who Jesus is. It matters that Jesus is the incarnation of, the embodiment of the good news of God. Because in the text we heard this morning, which is Jesus’ very first sermon recorded in Mark’s gospel, he exhorts his listeners to “believe in the good news,” which is to say, to “give the whole of themselves; the depths of themselves; their body, mind, will, spirit and emotion; their heart, to God.” If that is what “believe” means, then you really do want to know who you are giving all of yourself to. It matters who Jesus is and that Jesus is the embodiment of God’s good news.

This whole business of believing having to do with matters of the heart, as I’ve defined it, and having to do with relationships more than with information, helps me to understand the call of the disciples which follows. Jesus invited Simon, Andrew, James, and John to follow him. And, they did. Immediately. If belief has to do with who, not what you love, then their response makes sense because it has to do with developing relationships, and, in our case as Christians, forming a community and developing relationships that point to or attempt to embody God’s hopes and dreams for the whole human community. So, following Jesus is about developing relationships with each other and with God and inviting other people into our

life together. We give our heart to, or as Borg puts it, we “belove” God revealed in Christ, and, our neighbor, who is beloved by God (Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, Harper One, 2011, page 119). Later, Jesus quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus just comes out and states plainly: “...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ [and], ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). That is what Simon, Andrew, James and John were soon to discover they had signed on for.

Now I recognize this might be a little bit scary for progressive Protestants, particularly for those of us out of the Reformed tradition who pride ourselves on having developed an informed faith. All of this emphasis on the relational and emotional appears to teeter on the edge of an anti-intellectualism which we are sure defines Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Fundamentalists whose mantra is “Give your heart to Jesus or else... .” Well, “Take heart!” “Courage!” Definitions number 11 and 49 of “heart” in the OED (OED, pages 160-161). This is not about throwing out your mind with the emotional bath water. This is about the orientation of the whole of yourself, mind, spirit, will, emotion... . Jesus is inviting his first disciples and is inviting us to be fully human here, to be whole, to be fully ourselves, fully invested as human beings in community with God and with each other. That is what the kingdom of God is. The gospel is God’s action in Jesus to bring this vision of wholeness for all people and for all creation (the Hebrew word for this is “shalom”) to birth.

Now, is that something you can give your heart to? Put another way, to both paraphrase and to quote Enuma Okoro who wrote in a recent edition of *Sojourners*: “The time is at hand for us to give ourselves over to seeking justice, loving our neighbors, caring for the destitute, and turning the world upside down so it looks right-side up from God’s perspective” (Enuma Okoro, *Living the Word*, *Sojourners*, January 2012, page 49).

The first thing Jesus did to reveal the kingdom of God at hand was to begin to gather together a community of people who would live into what he knew the kingdom of God looked like. Simon, Andrew, James and John signed on. They gave themselves over to Jesus’ vision which was to seek justice, love neighbor, care for the vulnerable; to turn the known world upside down.

What is the vision of the world to which people are giving themselves over to now? Courtesy of Jim Alf, I am privileged to read the *Christian Science Monitor* with some regularity and a sub-title of an article titled “My Generation is Busy Reimagining ‘the Ethical Life’” startled me. The sub-title of this article is “As Facebook Replaces Church, Millennials Look Online for New Ways to Do Good” (Courtney E. Martin, “My Generation is Busy Reimagining ‘the Ethical Life,’” *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 19, 2011, page 34). Now, our staff members with cell phones have just converted to smart phones. What does this have to do with anything I’ve talked about thus far? We’ve converted to smart phones so that we can communicate with Millennials, with our youth and young adults, because texting, tweeting, and Facebooking are how Millennials interact with the world. I know. My children do not generally return my phone calls and they do not listen to the messages I leave on their phones. They text me. But, what I didn’t realize was that as we were taking another step into the virtual world by embracing smart phones we were treading on holy ground. I did realize we were entering a whole other way of being in community.

Witness, for example, the events referred to as the “Arab Spring” and how much of the connecting between people active in those protests for freedom and justice, and between those folks and their families and supporters around the world were through social media. In Tunisia, uploaded images of protestors killed by police galvanized the nation.

...A middle-class twenty-nine-year-old software developer and antirégime blogger, was [in Tunis] recording the protests and the police with his Blackberry. “People started to say, ‘Ben Ali... [get out...].”

[This young man] uploaded his video to Twitter, and it got a half a million views in a day. Hours later, President ... Ben Ali fled to exile in Saudi Arabia (Time, December 26, 2011, page 70).

The same was true in Egypt. One young man there “who’d never been politically active until he followed the Facebook protest instructions last January,” said “the day Mubarak stepped down, I was crying. For me, that was like bringing down a fake god” (Time, page 70).

In Spain, “about six million out of a population of forty six million participated in... protests.” Partly because of the work of a thirty one year old “internet entrepreneur...” who “helped set up social-media networks for the protests” (Time, page 72).

And, of course, whatever you think about the Occupy Movement, the same has been true with the Occupy Movement in the United States of America. Facebook, Twitter Feeds and YouTube video help create and maintain community for the Occupy community. All of the information I’ve just shared with you is taken from the December 26, 2011 Person of the Year issue of Time which includes this comment made “two years ago, [by] scholars Nicholas Chrisakis (Harvard) and James Fowler (University of California, San Diego), [who] published *Connected*, a ground breaking study of social networks, which they summarized as ‘how your friends’ friends’ friends affect everything you feel, think and do” (Time page 82). The article continues: “Calling the Arab uprising’s Facebook and YouTube and Twitter revolutions is not, it turns out just glib, wishful, American overstatement. In the Middle East and North Africa, in Spain and Greece and New York, social media and smart phones did not replace face-to-face social bonds and confrontation but helped enable and turbo-charge them, allowing protestors to mobilize more nimbly and communicate with one another and the wider world more effectively than ever before. And in police states with high internet penetration, Ben Ali’s Tunisia, Mubarak’s Egypt, Bashar Assad’s Syria - the critical mass of cell phone recorders plus YouTube plus Facebook plus Twitter really did become an indigenous free press” (Time, page 82).

For me, the impact of the immediacy of worldwide communication through social media is clear and powerful. On the downside, it is also fleeting, and in my view, limited, in that it is comparatively easier to delete messages you don’t want to see or hear or to unfriend someone on Facebook than it is to engage face to face with someone with whom you disagree. You can shut off or walk away from a screen and you can walk away from a person. We’ve all done it. But direct contact provides an opportunity for people who, in the end cannot agree, to acknowledge how they treat each other through disagreement may not only be as good as a relationship may get, but may even be something of what Jesus was talking about when he said, “Love your enemies.” Or, put in more secular language by “Arthur Chen, a [sixty-year-old] family-practice physician” who was among the thousands occupying Oakland:

The expression of outrage was very on target with our current economic crisis and the way it’s impacting the 99%, especially his low-income and uninsured patients. During his first day occupying Oakland, Chen remembers, “one of the announcers said, ‘You’re going to hear some things that you may totally disagree with.’ I chuckled [says Dr. Chen] and then I thought ‘This generation really is about inclusiveness and transparency.’ It was very moving” (Time, page 74).

It is somewhat reassuring, in the face of this reality, to recognize as Courtney E. Martin does in her article *My Generation is Busy Reimagining ‘the Ethical Life’*, “As Facebook replaces church, Millennials look on line for new ways to do good.” that:

Life-guiding beliefs and the behavior that grows out of them, contrary to some doomsday lamentation, are not dying. In fact, Millennials volunteer at higher rates than any generation

in history.

In poll after poll, [Millennials] express a deep desire to make the world a more just place. The notion of service - once defined by established charities, Sunday schools, and academic credit - is beginning grow up and move outside institutional walls. It's being infused with a sort of rogue authenticity and independence. (Courtney Martin, "My Generation is Busy Reimagining 'the Ethical Life,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, December 19, 2011, page 34)

It is also heartening that she recognizes in her generation a "a hunger for a spiritual source" and for "guidance" and "grace" (Martin, *Christian Science Monitor*, page 34).

Will social media and on-line role-playing games really provide the spiritual food, moral guidance, and sense of grace needed for a person to recognize who they are as a person, and, from the church's point of view, recognize who they are as a person before God in order to find meaning in or at least direction for life? As much as I enjoy them, will JRR Tolkien, JK Rowling, Star Wars and Star Trek, along with superheroes, Dungeons and Dragons or whatever else shapes on-line gaming do it? Ethan Gilsdorf discusses this in an article titled *Wisdom Goes Mainstream: Hard-core Nerds Impart Teachings of "Star Wars" and Tolkien*, in which he quotes Monique Bouchard, a graphic designer: "I like how gaming reminds me of my own moral compass... . My geekery has shown me that I really desire to be a hero, do the right thing, sacrifice for the weak, conquer the odds, save the helpless" (Ethan Gilsdorf, *Geek Wisdom Goes Mainstream*, *Christian Science Monitor*, December 12, 2011, page 36-37).

Can, will, does "my own moral compass" provide spiritual insight, moral guidance, a sense of grace and the same fulsome vision of community - community including the well-being of creation as a whole as well as peace between people on earth - as does what Jesus means when he says "the kingdom of God is at hand," and then invites Simon, Andrew, James and John both to give their hearts to God's community and to live the ethic of God's community in this world? I don't know. Technology provides resources for building or for destroying community. But does it or can it define the identity of a community or lead someone to discern who they are as a child of God? Can it define the character of a community's participant, the values embraced by a community and worked for in and through that community? Would Jesus posting the Beatitudes on his Facebook page or would Simon putting up a video of his mother-in-law's healing on YouTube or Jesus Tweeting "Love your neighbor as you love yourself" have built a community? I don't know. More to the point, what is it that makes the person who provides the content for the message? That, for me, is the key. Because if you remember where we started a little while ago, we don't give ourselves over to a message. Not to a tweet. Not to a text. Not to a video. We give ourselves over, at the end of the day, to a person. Incarnation matters. Embodiment matters. That's what mattered to Joseph and Mary and shepherds and angels and Anna and Simeon and the wise men and Simon and Andrew and James and John. That's actually what mattered and what yet matters in Tunisia, Lybia, Egypt, Syria, Spain, India, Greece, Mexico, and in the United States of America. It's not policy, although policy reflects values and institutionalizes justice. It's not information or programming, although these reflect character and support our justice seeking and community building. It's not technology itself. It is ultimately God revealed in the created order, and, for most of us, God revealed through other people who live together in ways that build us up, rather than tear us down; enrich, rather than impoverish; heal, rather than fragment; bless, rather than curse; love, rather than ignore; who live in

ways which at least point toward what we imagine Jesus meant when he declared the kingdom of God has come near... ." Life in community with real people reveals the deepest matters of the heart, that in which we can confidently place our faith and trust, that which we can affirm with all of who we are when we proclaim: "I believe."