

Making Room

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Romans 15:2-7 (CEB)

Each of us should please our neighbors for their good in order to build them up. ³ Christ didn't please himself, but, as it is written, *The insults of those who insulted you fell on me.* ⁴ Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures. ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude toward each other, similar to Christ Jesus' attitude. ⁶ That way you can glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ together with one voice.

⁷ So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory.

In this worship series titled "Am I a Christian?", we have explored the various ways Christian faith is understood and interpreted across a wide array of churches, denominations, and understandings. Recognizing that the term "Christian" carries political and ideological baggage as well as its most basic definition of "one who follows Jesus," we have attempted to disentangle problematic associations and focus on the person and the ministry of Jesus.

A second but equally important consideration besides our named question, "Am I a Christian?" is an implied question: "What *kind* of Christian do I want to be?" That is a question that I hope you will be more equipped to consider today as we conclude our series.

Church of the Saviour is a United Methodist congregation, which means that we follow a tradition that was founded by John Wesley in 18th century England. Wesley was an Anglican priest and a reformer. He believed that our faith should be grounded in practices that deepen relationship with God and lived out in acts of service that bring hope and healing to the world around us. To help people do that, he established a set of regular practices he followed and urged others to follow, a method of practicing faith that led to the name by which his movement would become known: *Methodists*. He encouraged people to pursue this way of life through an understanding of God's grace – grace that reaches for us even before we know we need it, grace that offers us a fresh start no matter what we have done, grace that moves us toward a more perfect expression of love, just the way God loves us.

We also fall under a broader category of Protestant Christian tradition – that is, churches that split off from the Roman Catholic Church in Western Christianity during the 15th and 16th centuries. All Protestant expressions broadly share the same historic movement away from a centralized structure of authority and doctrine to an egalitarian arrangement in which the Bible became accessible to ordinary people, worship was conducted in common languages, and anyone could confess their sins and receive forgiveness. Continental Protestants proclaimed three "onlys": *sola scriptura* – the Bible is the highest authority, not the

Church; *sola fide* – faith alone is what saves us from sin, not works; and *sola gratia* – forgiveness is God’s gift to us, grace offered freely without anything we do to earn it.

Protestantism made scripture and theology more accessible – anyone could read the Bible for themselves (if they could read), pray directly to God without the need for a priest, and form their own understanding of God. But because people who read the Bible interpreted it in different ways, it became increasingly important within Protestant traditions to have the “correct” interpretation of scripture. New denominations formed and divided over doctrine and practice. And each expression claimed to be correct in its own way.

The emergence of Rationalism in the 18th and 19th centuries brought new levels of engagement with scripture through language studies, social sciences, and archaeology; and with it, new questions about what is known and can be known. Historical criticism raised new questions about who wrote the books of the Bible and how it came to be. In the early 20th century, Christian Fundamentalism was birthed in response to Modernism, which held fast to literal interpretations of scripture and perceived fidelity to the faith of the first century. *I’ve grossly oversimplified all of this history, but I want to provide some sense of context.*

On one hand, these differences of interpretation matter a great deal. If we believe that the Bible is the highest source of authority when it comes to our faith, and we do, then we want to read and interpret it correctly. It is particularly important that our interpretation does not cause harm. How we understand scripture and how we follow it matter.

But one of the unintended consequences of the Protestant movement is that it causes us to conflate faith with what we think about God or what we believe about God. *Faith is more than what we believe.*

That is not to say that what we believe is unimportant. What we believe about God matters a great deal. If our concept of God is one who is angry and vengeful, waiting to catch us in the act when we do something wrong, that is a God we fear but will never love. If we believe that God loves everyone but asks nothing of us, we likely understand God as one we can love but do not respect. If we believe that God created the universe but is indifferent toward us, our feelings toward God will also be indifferent.

Our beliefs shape not only our understanding of God and the world around us, but also our understanding of ourselves. They define our relationships with our families and friends. They shape our actions (or at least they should). What we believe largely determines how we engage with the world around us and how we treat others. Our thoughts and beliefs about God form our image of God and define our relationship with God. They tell us why God can be trusted (or not). But belief, in itself, is not faith.

In fact, faith is a lot less about *what we believe* than it is about *who we trust*. When faith is reduced to a set of principles we believe, it remains confined by our capacity to think. What we know about God, or what we *think* we know about God, is only the smallest fraction of all that God is, because the fullness of God is ultimately unknowable. Believing the things we think are

“correct” – even believing the “right” things about God – is a poor substitute for faith, because faith is about having a lived and embodied trust in God.

Trusting God is altogether different from believing. Trust is built on relationship. It comes from an experience of a God who not only loves us, but knows us better than we know ourselves and wants to be known by us. Trust comes through practiced presence and both a collective and personal memory of God’s faithfulness throughout time.

When we reduce faith to what we believe or what we think, we misplace our trust. We are not actually trusting God in that instance; we are trusting ourselves and disguising it as trust in God. No matter how “correct” our believing may be, it is far less than the fullness of God. Theologian Peter Enns says that faith is not about what, but about who.¹ It’s about *who we trust*. We miss that when we are preoccupied with “correct thinking.” He writes:

When we grab hold of “correct” thinking for dear life, when we refuse to let go because we think that doing so means letting go of *God*, when we dig in our heels and stay firmly planted even when we sense that we need to let go and move on, *at that point we are trusting our own thoughts rather than God*. We have turned away from God’s invitation to trust in order to cling to an idol.²

In the Bible book of Genesis, Adam and Eve have everything they need. God gave them a beautiful garden to live in and told them they could eat from any plant or tree except one: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the temptation was too great. Their sin was that they chose *knowledge over trust*.

Then what should we do? Should we abandon all pursuit of knowledge, quit studying the Bible or other Christian thinkers, just blindly trust and leave our minds out of it? Absolutely not! God gave us the gift of intellect for a reason, and wrestling with scripture and big questions is one of the most faithful things we can do. The opposite of faith isn’t doubt; it’s certainty. Doubt is actually a gift from God, because it breaks us out of the trap of certainty and opens us to a more mature faith. Our questions move us from certainty to openness. And that’s a good thing.

We’re going to keep leading small group studies and encouraging everyone to read their Bible daily. I’m going to keep preaching and teaching and writing, and I hope you’ll keep listening. All those things help us grow in faith, but they don’t take the place of faith.

How can we keep the focus where it belongs, on trusting God? A few suggestions:

First is to *recapture a sense of mystery*. With all of the things we gained through the Age of Enlightenment, this is one thing we let go of, to our detriment. In our pursuit of scientific discovery and finding a rational explanation for everything, we have lost a sense of mystery, that there are things that are simply beyond our comprehension. Unlike our forebears when the Bible was being written, we know that when we look up into the night sky that we are seeing planets and solar systems and stars, and that all of it is part of a universe that is billions of light years across, but we don’t know why we are drawn to gaze at that same sky over and over. We study the human body and have made major breakthroughs in medical science, but we’re confounded

that the same treatment that heals some people fails in others. We can do complex mathematics, build skyscrapers, and create incredible works of art, but we cannot explain why we fall in love. Some things cannot be explained, and we might be better off not trying to explain them.

What if instead we learn to embrace mystery, to practice wonder, to reclaim a sense of awe? What if worship wasn't just following a program, but understood as an encounter with the divine? What if silence became an exercise in quieting our hearts and minds and just being present with God? What if we could release our desire to control and just...be?

Second: *ask big questions* – not with the expectation that we will find the one right answer, but so that we can practice the kind of wonder that doesn't need to have the “right” answer. It's okay to ask big questions about our faith, even about God. The scriptures invite us to ask hard questions; they even give us lots of examples. Doubt is critical to growing and developing in faith. Doubt is God's way of moving us from misplaced certainty to a more mature faith. Our Jewish siblings understand the value of wrestling with big questions. They've honed that skill for centuries. If your faith construct is too fragile to make any room for doubt, that's a sign it's time to go deeper.

The fullness of God may be ultimately unknowable, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to know God better. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and mystic, prayed:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.³

And finally, *make room for each other*. N.T. Wright said that with all the hundreds of denominations and the thousands of different ways we practice our faith, we can't all be right; but we could all be wrong. Instead of staking out our territory and digging in our defenses, what if we adopted a posture of curiosity and humility? We have centuries of Christian thought, an ever-widening diversity of cultural expressions, and the resource of countless perspectives to draw from. Through intentional engagement and practicing deep listening, we can grow together in our understanding and experience.

The greatest strength of our faith is in our relationships. The church – or even just an informal fellowship – is a community of people seeking God's hope for their lives, filtering insights through scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. And the church does help us discern God's hope collectively, and shapes the way we practice our faith. The church is at its best when it is not indoctrinating people about what to believe, but inviting them into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Or, as a wise leader once said, sharing faith is one hungry person showing another person where to find bread.

What you believe matters. But Jesus didn't offer people a contract or have them sign a statement of faith. He invited them to "come and see," to discover a way of living that brings us closer to God. Are you a Christian? A better question might be, *who do you follow?* Whether or not you choose to use the term "Christian" is up to you. Either way, the invitation is offered still. Faith isn't about what we believe; it's about who we trust. Amen.



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