

**February 14, 2016**

**TEXT: Luke 4:1–12**

**TITLE: Confessing our Faith**

In 1951, radio host Edward R. Murrow and a team of editors aired the first episode of *This I Believe*. The first run of the series aired daily for the next five years, in which a range of individuals—famous and ordinary—shared in under five minutes or less what they believed. Murrow, in his introduction to the series, says:

“We hardly need to be reminded that we are living in an age of confusion—a lot of us have traded in our beliefs for bitterness and cynicism or for a heavy package of despair, or even a quivering portion of hysteria. Opinions can be picked up cheap in the market place while such commodities as courage and fortitude and faith are in alarmingly short supply.

“...It has become more difficult than ever to distinguish black from white, good from evil, right from wrong. What truths can a human being afford to furnish the cluttered nervous room of his mind with, when he has no real idea how long a lease he has on the future? It is to try to meet the challenge of such questions that we have prepared these pieces. It has been a difficult task and a delicate one.<sup>1</sup>”

It is a difficult and delicate task to state what we believe. Warned by the old adage to never discuss religion or politics (especially over dinner), we are taught that saying what we believe has the potential to get sticky. We open ourselves to the potential for critique or disagreement. We risk offending someone we'd rather keep on our good side. At best, naming our beliefs can leave us feeling exposed, vulnerable. At its worst, when someone's beliefs reflect hatred or intolerance, expressing those beliefs can cause oppression or harm. Yes, it's tricky business to say what one believes.

But as tricky as it is to state what we believe, we are called to do it every day. Our beliefs inform all of our choices. When I meet with couples who are planning to get married, their first homework assignment is to look at their beliefs. As individuals they reflect on what they believe, who or what has impacted their beliefs, and how they live out their beliefs each day. Then as a couple they share their beliefs with one another, and write a statement of belief to guide their family together. I tell them this: Beliefs shape all of our actions—how we spend our time, how we spend our money, how we encounter those we love and how we are in community with the stranger. Our beliefs shape us, and as such, they shape the world.

In our text for this morning, we go back a few steps in the timeline of Luke's gospel. Jesus has just emerged from the waters of the Jordan and now heads straight into the desert. Weak from hunger but armed with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is tempted by the Devil for forty days. At the end of this trial, Jesus must claim what it is that he stands for—what he believes; what he is going to be about.

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<sup>1</sup><http://thisibelieve.org/essay/16844/>

When the Devil invites Jesus to prove his divinity by turning a stone into bread—Jesus replies “Man does not live by bread alone.” When the Devil invites Jesus to receive authority over all of the kingdoms of the world if only Jesus would worship him, Jesus says: “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.” And finally, when the Devil invites Jesus to throw himself down from the highest place in Jerusalem and command God’s angels to rescue him—trying to use even scripture to trip Jesus up!—Jesus replies “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Run down and exposed, Jesus is able to withstand every temptation as he prepares to begin his public ministry. He has no conventional weaponry, and very little physical strength. Jesus’ defense comes through a confession of faith. He knows and speaks the words of scripture when he is at his most vulnerable. He has internalized and embodied their truth—after all, he IS the Word that has become flesh. He speaks with confidence his belief of who he is and whose he is. His beliefs provide a solid foundation upon which he can stand. His priorities orient him. His convictions give him courage. Although he is weak, he remains strong.

When we look to Jesus’ example, we are reminded of the importance of confessing our faith. This charge means more than admitting our sins before God as we seek forgiveness—although that can be an important part of it. “In Christian tradition, . . . confession has an earlier, positive sense. To confess means openly to affirm, declare, acknowledge or take a stand for what one believes to be true . . . When Christians make a confession, they say, ‘This is what we most assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand.’”<sup>2</sup>

We are a people who profess our beliefs, and strive by the power of the Holy Spirit to put those beliefs into action. We do this as individuals and we do this together. As Presbyterians, one forum for this is through our Book of Confessions, part of our denomination’s constitution. Filled with creedal statements of faith—many of which cross denomination and continent and space and time—the Confessions give voice to the witness of the church and call believers to embody our faith in word and in deed.

These Confessions are both theological documents and historical documents. They say what the community of faith believes, in a particular time and place. They reflect the wisdom of the Spirit in light of real historical events: The Theological Declaration of Barmen, for example, was written in 1934 by German church leaders who reaffirmed that Jesus—not Hitler—was the head of the church; The Confession of 1967 was written to give voice to the church’s call to participate in the ministry of reconciliation in the wake of the civil rights movement. Most recently, the PC(USA) adopted the Belhar Confession—written in South Africa in the 1980s to call for unity in the face of apartheid, understanding that a call to unity is as relevant to us today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States of America as it was to the church in South Africa 30 years ago. In the face of

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<sup>2</sup> The Book of Confessions of the PCUSA, xi.

social conflict or the court of popular opinion, the Confessional language helps us to stand firm in the face of trial and profess who we are and whose we are.

Confessing our beliefs is seen as an act that is fundamental to our life of faith. We do this as an individual when we join the church. We do this in community when we say a creed. But we also do this together through the quality of our living.

There is a power that comes by stating our beliefs together, as a community. When 300,000 people gathered at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 29, 1963 and joined hands and started singing: "We shall overcome. We shall overcome. We shall overcome one day. Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome one day," they were doing more than singing a song. They were confessing their belief that together they would overcome the scourge of racist oppression. They were claiming that racism would not have staying power. They were writing a counter-narrative to those in power. They were giving voice to their hope of a better day, a new way of being in relationship, a different standard by which to shape human community. They were also proclaiming their commitment to act—to march and sit and sing and protest and not give up until a new day dawned. And they were strengthened for the work ahead, and for what would be a long and difficult journey, by singing the same song together and stating their shared belief out loud.

When 1.8 Presbyterians adopted a creed that claims that faithful discipleship breeds unity, overcomes cultural divides, and nurtures reconciliation we are voicing the prophetic beliefs at the heart of our faith: that God is love; that God in Christ overcame all that divides and calls us to unity in him, that God calls us to love. Hear the words of the creed:

*We believe*

*That Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;*

*That unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;*

*That this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;*

A similar hope holds true every time we confess our faith together. We are collectively orienting ourselves toward Christ, saying together that our lives have been transformed by God's grace poured out for us. We are claiming that we know what we are about as a community—and that our beliefs will guide our actions that we might participate in

reconciliation, peacemaking, and works of justice. We profess a counter-cultural narrative in the face of all of the cries for individualistic gain by saying that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. We gain the confidence that comes in knowing that we are not alone.

What is it that you believe? What has shaped your beliefs across time? How do you put your beliefs into practice?

We live in a world where so many ideals are vying for our attention. Politicians clamor for our votes through twitter feeds and evening debates—and we have to ask ourselves: “What do I believe? For whom will I vote?” Corporations try to persuade us to buy their products, to believe in their goods, to put our money into their pockets—and we have to ask ourselves: “What is important to me? In what or whom do I wish to invest?” We watch the news and see a broad range of views on matters of economics, politics, justice, and as we sift through the information on the screen we do so through a filter of our own experiences and understanding and ask, “What do I know to be true? How do I discern God’s call?”

The confessions can help. They can offer us wisdom and a sense of history. They can offer us an expression of faith that does not come in isolation but community. “Confessions have often prepared and strengthened Christians to stand together in faithfulness to the gospel when they have been tempted to surrender to powerful forces of political, racial, social, or economic injustice.” We need that, more than ever, now.

Throughout these forty days, we follow the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. May we courageously explore how our beliefs inform our actions—as individuals and as a church. May we repent of the places in our lives where our choices hurt more than help, and may we strive to live courageously into the love, justice and reconciliation of Christ.

Let us not lose heart, for we do not go this road alone. The Holy Spirit goes before us, preparing the way, sustaining us for the journey. Let us meet the Spirit there, trusting that God’s love enacted really does have the power to transform the world.