***I BELIEVE: A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH***

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Texts: James 1:19-25 and 2 Corinthians 13:11-14

Two months ago, when we began this series of sermons on confessions of the church, I posed this question: *What do* ***you*** *believe and how might you express that belief?* In the confessions, we hear Christians from across 1700 years or so from places near and far answer that question in response to the varied challenges they faced, questions with which they wrestled, and issues that were uppermost in their minds. Their experiences and expressions of faith inform our own. At times we may disagree with them, at other times they may speak for us, but in the end, we must each come to our own conclusions about what **we** believe, who our faith calls us to be, and what faithfulness calls us to do.

When I first came to Virgina to attend seminary, I had a pastoral care course that had me visit with residents at Westminster Canterbury in Richmond. One of my first visits was with an elderly woman, a true southern lady, who politely asked me, “Where are you from?” When I responded, “Pennsylvania,” she replied, “Oh, I thought you were a Yankee!” In all my years growing up in western PA and then living in central PA, it would never have crossed my mind to distinguish anyone as Yankee or Confederate, but clearly that distinction was very present in her mind. A few moments later, as she was telling me about her life and family, she made reference to “the recent unpleasantness.” “I’m sorry,” I said, “what was the recent unpleasantness?” “Why the war, young man,” she replied. “You mean the Civil War?” I asked somewhat hesitantly, since it had ended about 135 years before our meeting. “Why of course,” she said, “the War between the States.” Thus began my education into southern perspectives on the Civil War also referred to as “the War between the States”, “the War for States Rights”, “the War of Northern Aggression”, or as in her case, “the recent unpleasantness.” That war had long existed for me in the annals of American history, but for her it was still very much in the present.

Perhaps I should not have been so surprised, being Presbyterian. For, at the time of the Civil War the Presbyterian Church divided along the battle lines of North and South, and while the nation came back together after a few years – at least formally – the Presbyterians stayed divided for the next 120 years with northern and southern streams of our Presbyterian family. Why so? Henry Van Dyke, author of *The Other Wiseman* suggests that Presbyterians “*have a propensity to quarrel and divide over issues that are not central to the teaching of Jesus*.” Perhaps that is attributable to our Scottish roots, for:

*Writing early last century Dean Ramsay tells of an Englishman who having observed the number of Scottish churches, remarked to the bus driver that there must be a great deal of religious feeling in Scotland. “Na” said the driver. “Its sometimes more crabbedness.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Whether it was crabbedness, stubbornness, or lingering rancor, it was not until 1983 that the two branches of the family – the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the PCUS) in the South and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (the UPCUSA) in the North came together to form the Presbyterian Church in the Unites States of America (the PCUSA) to which we belong.

At the time of reunion, the church decided that it would be helpful to adopt a new statement of faith in contemporary language to express the faith of this newly reunited church family. Thus was born *A Brief Statement of Faith*, the most recent of all the confessions in our Book of Confessions. (pp.37-38 in your hymnal) Its title is somewhat of a misnomer, for while it is shorter than some statements of faith in our Book of Confessions, it is not really brief. When I was in seminary, one of my professors was working with the committee trying to bring the statement across the finish line to the General Assembly, and he shared the frustration of trying to say all that the committee members thought needed to be said, while trying to be succinct enough to write a creed that could be used in worship. The final version that was adopted is often used by us in worship, but never in its entirety – only in sections – for were we to use the whole “Brief Statement” on a given Sunday, we could never beat the Baptists and Episcopalians to lunch!

The Brief Statement is trinitarian in form with an opening affirmation of faith in the triune God, echoing language from the benediction in 2 Corinthians that we heard a few moments ago – *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion (*that is *koinonia) of the Holy Spirit*. And the Statement concludes with a trinitarian doxology: *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.* Between those trinitarian bookends are sections on each of the three persons of the Trinity. I do not intend to elaborate on all the affirmations in those paragraphs, lest this sermon become, like the Statement – not brief – but there are a few aspects that are significant for us in contrast to our other confessions of faith.

The first notable difference is that the Brief Statement is corporate, not individual. It is not “I” but “we” who make these affirmations, reflecting its intended use in corporate worship. In this respect it is akin to our prayer of confession each week which is always couched in terms of “we” while leaving time in silence for those “I” confessions that we need to make individually. It is “we” because this is the faith we share, the affirmations we make as a community of faith that expresses its faith together. This is not just *my faith*, but *our faith*!

Secondly the Brief Statement expresses faith, not by saying “we believe” but rather “we trust.” As I have said many times from this pulpit: *faith* is not believing someone can push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope stretched across the Grand Canyon; *faith* is getting in the wheelbarrow. Faith is trusting enough to risk your life for what you believe to be true. For us it is trusting God enough to place our lives in God’s hands and live as God calls us to live, as Jesus calls us to live, as the Spirit guides us in living. It is trusting God’s voice over our own and over all those other voices in the world that suggest they know better what might bring us joy, peace, security, or salvation. We trust God alone, and while we may wrestle with, debate, and struggle to discern what it is God is asking of us, we remain steadfast in trusting God with our lives in life and in death.

Thirdly, unlike other confessions, the Brief Statement begins its trinitarian affirmation of faith, not with *God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*, but with *Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God*. In so doing, we express our faith in Jesus as the revelation of God by which we best know God and God’s purpose for our lives, and we reject any suggestion of hierarchy among the persons of the Trinity, a charge which has haunted the church across the ages. That statement about Jesus, unlike prior statements, focuses not just upon the meaning of his death and resurrection, but upon his life. It does not overlook the significance of his death and resurrection, offering this strong statement:

*Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, and delivering us from death to life eternal.*

But it also takes time to walk through Jesus’ life, recognizing his **preaching, teaching healing, eating, forgiving,** and **calling** that were essential aspects of his ministry and examples for us to follow 2,000 years after his death. If we want to know how we are to live, we can look to how Jesus lived, and the Brief Statement lifts up those actions of Jesus in order to affirm their importance for us.

Those affirmations about Jesus’ life exemplify a last significant difference of this Brief Statement from other creeds: it is full of strong verbs. The whole statement bursts with action, not only in describing Jesus as I just mentioned, but in describing the other persons of the Trintiy as well. God

**makes** everyone equally in God’s image,

**acts** with justice and mercy to redeem creation,

**chose** a covenant people to bless all families of the earth,

**hears** their cries,

**loves** us still,

**makes** us heirs with Christ,

and **is faithful** still.

The Holy Spirit

**justifies** us by grace through faith,

**sets us free** to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,

**binds us together** in the Church,

**inspired** the prophets,

**rules** our faith and life,

**engages** us through the word proclaimed,

**claims** us in the waters of baptism,

**feeds** us with the bread of life and cup of salvation,

**calls** us to all ministries of the Church

and **gives** us courage to **pray**,

to **witness**,

to **unmask idolatries** in church and culture,

to **hear** the voices of people long silenced,

and to **work** for justice, freedom, and peace.

Our God is not a passive God, and we are not called to be God’s passive people! We are called to be faithful disciples who are actively at work in the world as God has been at work in and through us. In the words of the prophet Micah: *What does the Lord require of you, but to* ***do*** *justice,* ***love*** *kindness, and* ***walk*** *humbly with your God!* Or as we heard James write: *Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.*

Are you such a doer? Are you an active disciple, or are you content to wrap yourself in your faith like a warm blanket on a cold night to comfort yourself without offering comfort or warmth to your freezing neighbor? You call yourself a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ. What then **do** you believe? You can write down what you believe, and that is a good exercise; you can use this Brief Statement of Faith to speak for you; or better yet, you can express what you believe by living it with joy, hope, peace, humility, service, faith, and love day by day by day! For the best confession of faith you can make is not with your words; it is with your life! Amen

1. The Very Rev Dr James A. Simpson, “A Polarised Church” in *Life and Work*, May 2013, p.47 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)