

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Sunday, May 31, 2015  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
*How large is your Faith?*

Trinity Sunday seems to be a good time for us to explore how large our faith is. Some among us may feel that our faith is mostly a personal matter. I certainly agree that faith is a personal matter. I also believe it is vital that we respect the reality that each of us have our own understanding of who God is, how God works in our lives, and how we live out our faith in the world. I look forward to the opportunities that lie ahead for me to engage with you individually concerning your beliefs and your doubts. I have come to believe that faith does not exist without doubt. If we have faith without doubt, then we have sure and certain knowledge. Faith is belief in God in the midst of our doubts.

Since this is Trinity Sunday, let us begin by exploring what we make of the Trinity? Here is what Martin Luther had to say in a “Sermon for Trinity Sunday” written in 1522. *“It is indeed true that the name ‘Trinity’ is nowhere to be found in the Holy Scriptures, but has been conceived and invented by man. For this reason it sounds somewhat cold and we had better speak of ‘God’ than of the ‘Trinity.’ This word signifies that there are three persons in God. It is a heavenly mystery which the world cannot understand.”*<sup>1</sup>

I served in ministry at Mayflower Church under the mentorship of their Lead Minister, the Rev. Sarah Campbell. During my time there, Sarah authored an article titled “Slouching toward Creedalism?” which was later published in the UCC theological journal, Prism. It is a wonderful article that I would be happy to share with anyone who might be interested in discussing it. Sarah, considers the Doctrine of the Trinity to be the first creed. Sarah, consistent with the founders of the UCC, maintains that the difficulties of creeds is when they are used as a test of faith. She has no difficulty in using the Trinity as symbolic was of understanding God. But she is concerned about the fact that the language “belief in a triune God” is now appearing in UCC documents like a creed and was also listed as a requirement for candidates being considered for the UCC General Minister and President. Her article is an attempt to lift up these concerns for further theological reflection.

The most important document from the UCC in regard to creeds is The Preamble to the UCC Constitution. It reads: *“The United Church of Christ...claims as its own the faith of the historic church expressed in the ancient creeds.”*<sup>2</sup> Therefore the UCC does not disavow the ancient creeds. The critical issue is that they are used as testimonies and not as tests.” The preamble continues, *“It affirms the responsibility of*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity/LutherGospel.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/polity>

*the Church in each generation to make this faith its own...*<sup>3</sup> The UCC's "God is Still Speaking," campaign was an important modern attempt by the UCC to make this faith our own. I believe it is important for each member of this church and for the church as a whole to continually be engaged in understanding what we believe and in making the faith our own.

It is also essential that we share our faith. I believe that our faith is small if it remains only a personal matter. Our faith is enlarged when we participate in a faith community such as Edina Morningside Community Church, United Church of Christ. I look forward to a future community gathering – on a date not yet determined – when, as part of the tasks of Interim Ministry, we will share our memories of how our faith has been enriched by this church. We will also share memories of how our faith has been challenged by this church in ways that may have even caused us to question our continued participation. Sharing this history, respectfully, allows us to both learn from the failures or mistakes of the past and to build upon the strengths of this community for a vital future. In the coming weeks, you are most welcome to begin jotting down notes that might help you trigger your memory.

I have a story for you about memory. In mid-March of this year, a complete stranger emailed me asking if I would be willing to be interviewed for an article he was writing about the history of the Minnesota AIDS Project. I was involved with that organization both as a volunteer as early as 1985 and as a paid staff member in 1987, but had no ongoing connection there since I left employment in 1988. My first thought was that I could barely remember anything from that long ago. Initially I could not even remember several of the names of my co-workers. Nevertheless, he felt as though I would have important memories to share and we agreed to meet. In preparation for meeting with him, I researched any hard copy documents I could find in old storage files. There were no electronic files since I worked there prior to moving into the computer age – at least for my entering into the computer age. As I reviewed a few articles that I found and began to journal, I found my mind flooded with memories. We ended up meeting for four hours and had to schedule a second meeting! I feel as though my life has been enriched from the process of reconnecting with powerful memories of a brief, but most important part of my history. I pray that when we engage in the historical review of Edina Morningside Church, many of you will have similar experiences.

Why is our faith important? It is our faith and beliefs that draw us into a loving relationship with God. I could probably end my message now. It is our faith and beliefs that draw us into a loving relationship with God. If we could experience the fullness of a God who loves us, maybe we wouldn't even need to be in community. If we could experience the fullness of a God who loves us, we would naturally love one another. If we could experience the fullness of a God who loves us, we would respond by seeking to do God's will for a world in need of God's love, care and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

compassion. But, I believe that being in community enlarges our faith and our experience of the fullness of God's love.

It is our faith and beliefs that draw us together into this faith community. Our beliefs distinguish us from being a country club or other social organization. Nurturing our faith is a reason for coming together in worship and education. It is our faith that calls us to be witnesses in the world for the message that Jesus shared more than 2000 years ago. It is our faith that demands that we serve the needs of all of God's children through service and outreach. It is our faith that demands that we work to bring peace and justice to all those who suffer.

And what does today's text tell us about our faith? Biblical Commentator, Deborah J. Kapp says, *"If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first-century church members, it might be Nicodemus. In many ways he is a sympathetic character. A successful and self-confident man, he plays a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out Jesus' actions and social networks. He is committed and curious enough that he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face to face."*<sup>4</sup>

Nicodemus affirms his faith in Jesus with these words, *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."* (John 3:2) Jesus responded to Nicodemus in a way that both confused him and maybe stretched his rational mind. Jesus said, *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."* (John 3:3) Nicodemus continued his faith exploration by asking, *"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"* (John 3:4) In an attempt to awaken Nicodemus to an enlarged faith, Jesus continues by saying, *"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."* (John 3:6) The last words we hear from Nicodemus in this text give expression to his continuing struggle to understand what Jesus is trying to teach him. Nicodemus simply says, *"How can these things be?"* (John 3:9) Jesus proceeds to challenge Nicodemus about his ability to learn about spiritual things.

Jesus then offers these familiar words, *"For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes may not perish but may have eternal life."* (John 3:16) UCC Commentator Kate Matthews (Huey) has this to say about this most often quoted verse of the Bible: *"Unfortunately, for many... rather than reassuring us of the depth of God's love for the world, imposes instead what seems to be a requirement of intellectual assent...in order to 'have eternal life,' or, as we might say, to 'be saved.'"*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_may\\_31\\_2015](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_may_31_2015)

Huey than directs us to the words of Marcus Borg written in his book, The God We Never Knew. In discussing what it means to “believe” Borg writes: *“rather than strict intellectual assent to propositions and claims...belief is trust, is faithfulness, and the sense that there's something to all of this.” Borg continues, “...we're not required to accept...specific statements about God so much as to grow closer and deeper in our relationship with God.*<sup>6</sup>

It is my hope that whenever we hear this familiar scripture quoted, we might hear the word “believe” and recognize that believing is not about intellectual assent, but rather about sensing that there is something to all of this, believing is about trusting in a loving God, and believing is enlarging our faith by growing closer and deeper in our relationship to God. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.