

What I Believe

This is a two-part sermon that Carol Marsh and I offered together to our Eighth Day Faith Community in September 2004 as part of our church community's exploration of the role of religious belief in our lives. The ongoing conversation within our community has been revealing and rewarding.

David Hilfiker

I grew up as a pastor's son in a liberal, mainline denomination. I intended to follow my dad's footsteps into the ministry. But then I took some college philosophy and psychology courses and began to question the traditional Christian beliefs: the Virgin Birth, the miracles, the bodily resurrection, the existence of a theistic God, the efficacy of prayer, and so on.

So I came home and challenged my father. He hemmed and hawed, but it turned out he didn't believe them, either, or at least didn't think it *important* to believe them ... "except for the Resurrection," he said. "That's central to the faith."

I was stunned.

"If you don't believe in all these things," I said, "why haven't you preached about it? You couldn't tell by listening that you don't believe them."

He took the question seriously. Finally he said, "It would devastate some people. Think of old Mrs Heinz." [She was our organist.] "Her faith would be shattered if I preached that way."

The answer covered his integrity, but it didn't help my own search, and I ended up leaving the church ... for some 17 years.

It's not that I wasn't attracted to Christianity. I, in fact, *wanted* to be a follower of Jesus. But I couldn't pretend to believe things I didn't. For all of those 17 years, though, I left myself open to be convinced, and quite a few evangelical types tried. But it was always those beliefs in the supernatural that hung me up. Besides, if God was omnipotent, then God—in some real way—chose to let absolutely innocent children around the globe suffer. I didn't *want* to believe in such a god. I'd decided that if there were a God, God could not be inconsistent with the Truth, so I would search for the Truth rather than God. It still seems to me a pretty good approach.

After much searching under the guidance of CS Lewis's writings, I believed in enough of the teachings of Jesus that I wanted to join a church. I'd place the beliefs in the supernatural on a back burner and *behave* as if they were true (which is different from *pretending* they're true). I hoped I'd have an experience of God that would overwhelm my doubts. In the first church Marja and I joined, "behaving as if" also meant keeping quiet about my doubts.

As those of you who know me well might guess, that didn't work out very well.

So, when we found Church of the Saviour—where doubts were not only tolerated but welcomed—I was so relieved that we moved here with our family twenty years ago, primarily to join the church. Still, for the first ten years I struggled with those questions and came no closer to any answers. Even after joining Potter's House, I left membership several times because I didn't think my beliefs were "Christian enough." The upshot is that for thirty years I either kept myself out of the church or spent enormous amounts of spiritual energy sparring with these questions of belief in the supernatural. Finally, I knew I was never going to be able to believe those things. The other people in the church would just have to deal with it. I started defining myself only very conditionally as a "Christian" and called myself a "follower of Jesus."

What beliefs gave me trouble? Well, *most* of the doctrinal beliefs that composed traditional Christianity. Maybe the central problem is the belief in a *theistic*

God: an external, personal being who created the world and from time to time reaches in to intervene in it. In pre-scientific times there were lots of natural phenomena that needed explaining—sickness and healings, eclipses and the heavens, goodness and evil—and it made sense that a theistic God controlled all those things we didn't understand. But with the advent of the Enlightenment, the Heavens disappeared and there was no place for God to live.

Furthermore, science explained so many natural phenomena there was very little left for God to do. So I can't find any reason to believe that that kind of God exists.

My trouble with other doctrines probably stems from that first one. The Bible—though central to my belief and practice—isn't the "Word of God" in any literal sense; it's the work of men (and a few women) trying to understand the movement of God in their lives. Jesus isn't God or the unique Son of God; he was an extraordinary human being in whom people saw God in an especially clear way. Jesus did not "save us from our sins" in the sense that his crucifixion changed God's mind, allowing God to forgive us. Jesus didn't contravene physical laws of nature: water was not changed into wine, he did not walk on water, bodies that had lain dead for days didn't come to life. There was certainly much that was mysterious about Jesus, but no one can change the laws of the universe. His dead body wasn't resuscitated after two days in the tomb. I'm grateful to be part of a faith community with people for whom some of those beliefs are central to their faith, but I don't myself believe them.

Sometime during the past year, Gail Arnall handed everyone in our mission group an article by Bishop John Spong. In the article Spong summarized twelve elements of doctrine that he—as a twenty-first century person—could no longer believe. There they were ... all my doubts ... in plain English. He didn't believe them either. In the first century, he said, these beliefs had been appropriate ways to express eternal truths, but, within the twenty-first century worldview, they no longer made sense. Furthermore, he said that if the church insisted on these beliefs, then Christianity would die. It was such a breath of fresh air. I eagerly looked forward to a vigorous debate at our next mission group meeting since, surely, no one else in the group would agree with all of this.

But it turned out there was nothing to debate: We had a great discussion but—except for Kent's hesitation about one small part of one of the twelve sections—all five of us agreed completely with Spong.

Once again, I was stunned. A stranger walking into our worship Sunday mornings would go a long time before discovering that many of us did not, in fact, believe in traditional Christian doctrine. Except for our teachings, which are sometimes more explicit, our liturgy, our language, our songs, our prayers seem to speak to a theistic God; our communion service often implies our salvation through Jesus' crucifixion; and so on. I think what's happened is that many of us have become so accustomed to "translating in our heads" the old words and phrases into something that conforms to our belief that we no longer really hear what those old words and phrases actually say. Fair enough. That's okay for individual members. But why should it be so difficult for visitors and others to know what we believe?

After thinking about this for a while, I've a couple questions, both spiritual and practical.

1. Probably the most important one is: Well, if I don't believe those things, what's left? Who—or what—is God if not an external being? While I've come some ways with that question, I can't talk about it yet, so Carol Marsh, a person I believe to be very close to God, will preach the second half of this teaching, trying to respond to that concern: What's left?

2. How much disagreement is there in our community about these issues? Surely, we don't want a new orthodoxy where traditional beliefs aren't allowed, but I think it would do us good to bring these issues out and discuss them openly. It might also be useful to do some Biblical research together and learn what the scholars have been discovering over the past fifty years. The discovery of multiple gospels and multiple Christianities from the first century, for instance, has certainly changed my way of thinking about the beliefs of the first Christians. Maybe "traditional Christianity" isn't what we think it is.

3. Finally, will we want eventually to look again at our commitment, our covenant, our liturgies, our songs and try to make them consistent expressions of the beliefs of *all* of us? Do we want to make it more obvious to the visitor what we do believe?

Ultimately, I believe it's our *faith* not our *belief* that defines us as followers of Jesus. It's our commitment to that love that lies at the foundation of the universe that gives us our faith, and our faith is demonstrated in our behavior and actions. But I think it would be helpful to face each other with what we believe and what we don't.

Carol Marsh

When David asked me to share a teaching with him, he posed this question by way of explaining what he hoped I would address: If we release the image and concept of a theistic God, what is left to us? At that time I had just finished reading Elaine Pagel's book, Beyond Belief, and

had recently spent a lot of time in a mission group with David Dorsey, who had led me to Bishop Spong's book,

Why Christianity Must Change or Die.

Yet all these sobering influences cannot keep the following relatively silly movie scenes out of my mind as I contemplate this question. So, in order to clear the air and be able to move on, I will begin with the very secular.

In the Mel Brooks movie called "The History of the World", a Moses-like figure struggles down a mountain out of clouds of lightening and thunder. He balances precariously in his arms three carved stone tablets. He stops and shouts out, "I present to you the Fifteen ..." At that moment, one of the tablets wobbles out of his grasp and tumbles to the ground, shattering on a rock. Moses looks down, sees that it is unsalvageable, and, without skipping a beat, shouts, "... the Ten Commandments."

Now I know biblical story from large-screen story, so I did not go running to my Bible to find the missing five commandments. And besides, the scene couldn't have been authoritative: Moses looked *nothing* like Charlton Heston.

Then there's the Monty Python movie, "The Life of Brian." Brian is a Jesus figure who, in this scene, is teaching a crowd. Without bullhorn or microphone, Brian must wait after each sentence while those up front transmit the message to those in the rear. We see a man in the very back of the crowd, who pulls impatiently on the sleeve of the man in front of him, "What did he say?" The front-most man turns with a puzzled look on his face: "He said, 'Blessed are the *cheese* makers.' 'The *cheese* makers!'" indignantly repeats the other, 'Why should they be blessed?'"

Of course, we are not here to learn about the gospel according to Monty Python. Besides, the scene couldn't have been authoritative: the Jesus figure looks *nothing* like James Caviziel.

I'm poking fun, with Mel and Monty, at our imagining we can treat Bible as fact, at our pretensions and desire to know, to be right, to have the answers. Because in so doing, I begin to approach my response to David's question.

If we release the image and concept of a theistic God, what is left to us? Because the concept of the theistic God underlies our theology and belief system; much is gone in the release of it.

David has talked about why we are thinking about releasing this image: at Eighth Day, the words of our liturgies and even our member's commitment are coming under scrutiny. We desire that our words and the ways we worship have integrity with our faith.

I believe that our language is important, and that the consideration we will be giving to the ways we express our faith in word and in worship is necessary. At the same time I am aware of the danger of our human tendency to want certainty and definition - it is the enemy of faith. Herein lies the paradox: on one hand, the genuine need to know and to have integrity in word and deed: on the other hand, the fact of the unknowable, indescribable and unimaginable that is at the heart of faith.

Need to know and be able to describe with integrity: unknowable, indescribable, unimaginable. Notice the cruciform image.

Parker Palmer, in his wonderful book, The Promise of Paradox, talks about the creative tension that lies at the heart of such paradoxes. He challenges Christians to be willing to live in the painful uncertainty of that tension. Palmer is saying that we Christians need to have the courage to live on the arms of the cross of paradox.

So, how does that apply to Eighth Day Church? We have the opportunity to embrace this paradox. I want to suggest ways to do that.

Let's allow our language to *reflect* our faith, not *define* what we believe. Our dialogue, our words written and spoken, does not have to become a bulwark behind which we protect ourselves from the uncertainty of faith and the painful vulnerability of not knowing. We embrace the paradox (need to know and be able to describe with integrity: unknowable, indescribable, unimaginable) when we allow our language to reflect, even expose, the depths of our vulnerability, not hide us from it.

Let's not create definitions. Let's not attempt to make certain what we can never know this side the grave. Let's not write more doctrinal statements. Let's embrace the paradox.

Let's not work to persuade one another. Let's work to listen, to hear the mystery surrounding and within our hearts and our words. Let's allow the vulnerability of not knowing to pervade our conversation. Let's lead with our questions. Let's begin by saying, "We don't know." Let's embrace the paradox.

I loved Tom Copps' teaching in August. I loved it when he said, in reference to the theological arguments about what Paul meant when he said Jesus emptied himself, "WHO CARES?" He said that the theology, which meant to provide us with sound doctrine, worked instead to obscure the point being made about community. But we want to be in control of information, we want to know, we want to provide the answers or have the answers provided to us. It is so much easier to linger over interpretation and definition than it is to suspend our precious intellect and live in the tension between the knowing and the unknowable.

Additionally, if we are honest with our selves, we would admit that most often our need to persuade, to write our belief in stone, or to worship a certain way and to use certain words comes out of ego, or else out of fear.

Embracing the paradox leaves us terribly vulnerable, in great part because on the arms of the cross of paradox we experience death. What, in the spiritual life, could make us more vulnerable than allowing to die our comforting, long-cherished concepts? Then to say we need to accept the pain of these deaths? How?

How do those of us who welcome the change keep from simply creating more doctrine to grasp onto? How do those of us who resist the change keep from grasping what we know simply because we know it and it is comforting to us? How do we all, wherever we are in this discourse, release our need for certainty so that certainty may die?

How does Eighth Day Church live and die on the arms of this cross? Need to know and be able to describe with integrity: unknowable, indescribable, unimaginable.

I wonder – when we have the courage to lead with the vulnerability that comes of our decision to not try to resolve this paradox – if we will find ourselves touching the soft edge that allows Love in.

Because I think that Love is one of only two certainties (if you can call them that) I as a Christian have: that whatever Name we use – God or Divine Love, Higher Power or Father, Mother or Holy One – we agree that this creative force is ultimately and astoundingly about Love.

One thing more: Jesus is my unerring guide to Love, to God. Exactly who is God? I do not know. Exactly what is Love? I do not know. Exactly who was and is Jesus and how does he guide me? I cannot give a definitive answer, though I know it includes the carrying of a cross. I simply have faith that God is Love and Jesus is my surest guide to Love. Beyond that is mystery, is unknowing, is the essence of faith, which, according to my dictionary, is “complete trust or confidence without logical proof.” *Without logical proof.*

Yet what are our doctrinal statements and theological debates but manifestations of our human inability to accept the “without proof” part of faith? And how ironic that, over the centuries, churches have split, sects have been ostracized and hounded, wars have been fought in the name of our driving addiction to put proof into faith.

For, my dear friends, what does it matter? If we accept the tension of living between the need to know and the fact of the unknowable, who cares if the person beside us today calls God by the same name? What does it matter if my concept of God differs from yours?

For when we are granted a glimpse, given even a tiny moment in the Presence-That-Cannot-Be-Named-Or-Known, we are in a place in which words fail us, concepts fall completely away and doctrine is meaningless. Because: God is none of these things, even as we are none of these things.

What is left after we release our traditional doctrine? On the arms of the cross of paradox what is left is spaciousness: the open-ness of not knowing, of not having to know and of not having to have the answers. What we are left with is freedom: the freedom that comes from releasing our desperate grasp on certainty, the freedom to let Love in.

Say God, say Divine Love, say Father, say Mother, say Higher Power, say what we will: but let's allow ourselves to be swept away into a Love that is beyond our imagining. Start with questions, start with statements, start with our deepest desires, start where we will: but let's surrender our vulnerable, breaking, courageous hearts to the terrifying, terrific mystery that is faith.