

Credo
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
June 7, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:13-15

Were you able to pause for a moment last week and remember the events of Tiananmen Square?

Tiananmen Square translates to mean the Gate of Heavenly Peace. But it was anything but that when, 20 years ago, tens of thousands of young Chinese came out to protest for the freedom of Democracy only to be massacred by the Chinese military.

Thousands were killed or injured. But if we remember anything about that day, it is probably the one man who stood down an entire column tanks.

His action was his statement to the world - his credo, which is Latin for "I believe."

We live in a world that demands to know what we believe.

Our president stated this week that he believes that the nations of the West and Muslim nations in the East must focus more on mutual respect and mutual interests. On the same day here in Charlotte, Mayoral candidate John Lassiter met with about 25 faith leaders to share what he believes on issues facing our city, from homelessness to immigration.

We didn't pause in that meeting to reflect on the memory of Tiananmen Square and the blessing of our democratic freedom to share what we believe without fear. Perhaps we should have.

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For those of us who seek to live the Christian life, what we believe about our God is the foundation of everything else we believe, or at least it should be.

In his letters to the first-century church at Corinth, the apostle Paul encouraged the new believers there to hold fast to their faith in Jesus Christ, even in the face of persecution. Paul explains that our response to God's grace has two-parts and he finds the words for those two actions in Psalm 115, which he quotes.

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture - "I believed, and so I spoke" – we also believe and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus

Paul's message is straightforward: Even when the going gets tough, be confident and tell others about your faith, because God will protect believers in this realm and the next.

Fifteen hundred years after Paul wrote that letter, a Frenchman named John Calvin followed in his footsteps as a champion of the church in troubled times. In Calvin's era, the church had lost sight of its purpose, to glorify God. Its leaders misused their power and the essentials of the Christian life – simple worship, scripture, preaching and the Sacraments – had taken a back seat.

Calvin and other reformers stood in the path of the wayward church and spoke his credo, like that solitary Chinese demonstrator in front of a line of tanks. In helping begin the Protestant church, Calvin shaped much of what we know today as the Presbyterian tradition.

This year is the 500th anniversary of his birthday and so it's a big deal to some Presbyterians. In the Spring, Kelly and I attended a conference of pastors. Now, I know what you are thinking. "That sounds like a rousing time!" You don't know the half of it.

One night, after a day of worship and presentations, the conference agenda called for reception outside by a lake, a time to let our hair down. When we got there, the area was set up for a birthday celebration, with streamers and banners ... a birthday party for, you guessed it, John Calvin. Well, this is how Presbyterians party.

We even got some party favors - our own John Calvin party mask and a t-shirt with a picture of Calvin wearing a birthday hat and blowing a noise maker. This one is for our resident Calvin expert and Parish Associate pastor Diane Mowery.

Calvin's actual birthday is on July 10. Kelly and I will be anxiously awaiting the arrival of invitations to the parties that we know all of you are planning.

In all seriousness, John Calvin's influence on religion can hardly be overstated. It stretched across Europe to North America and South Africa. His ideas shaped politics, economics, science and culture. He influenced the church to be more involved in public affairs and to be a more forceful agent for peace and justice. His finger prints are on many of the things we do in worship.

So, to be Presbyterian is to be in large part Calvinist. And to be Calvinist and Presbyterian is also to be confessional. For Calvin, the church needed to confess to remind itself of how easily it can lose its way and how much it stands in need of God's grace. The same goes for us as individuals.

But being confessional means more than just confessing our sins. It is also to know what we believe about God and to be able to articulate our credo as best we can.

We are joined in worship today by several members of the confirmation class from our sister church, Covenant Presbyterian. This group of eighth graders has spent the last year or so preparing to make a decision about whether they would become adult members of the church. They were baptized as infants, claimed by God then, reflecting our denomination's belief that God loves us before we can know or love God. But at an appropriate age, every youth of the church is asked to study and think deeply about his or her faith and to make their own choice about joining the church.

My daughter Ellison took part in the confirmation class at Covenant because she has known many of her classmates since birth. She will present herself for membership at Caldwell later in the service and at the meeting of the session after church.

You might say that Ellison has been rehearsing for this day every Sunday she has repeated one of our creeds or confessions in worship. She has been shaped, at least in part, by those words. The same goes for all of us. We are formed by all we do in worship.

The creeds and confessions we use in the Affirmation of Faith are one way we rehearse or practice our faith. Lord knows, we need the practice. Some are ancient and time worn, some newer and more resonant with our modern world. We use the Apostle's Creed on most Sundays. But, as you have probably noticed, we use others because of how they can speak to us - and for us.

They probably don't use the words we would choose. Some use gender-specific language that reflects the era in which they were written.

Some days, we can speak them and own them personally. But there are other Sundays, after a week when our faith has been beaten down by the world, when they may wear like an ill-fitted suit and we can't speak them with integrity. On those days, we say them for each other, just as we pray for each other.

We say these affirmations because they connect us to the entire church. So when we say in the Apostle's Creed that we believe in the holy catholic church with a little "c", we aren't speaking of the Roman Catholic church, but the Christian church around the world and back through time, even to that little first-century church at Corinth

Another way we state what we believe is through the sacraments, including the Lord's Supper, which we celebrate today. In these sacraments, we re-enact what God has done for us and we claim them as visible signs of God's invisible grace.

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Still, as Paul wrote in Corinthians, we can't stop at just practicing our beliefs in front of each other and God. Our faith compels us to speak beyond the walls of the church.

That can be tricky sometimes, can't it? We live out our faith in a pluralistic world of many faiths and traditions, where it's easy to offend someone of a different tradition or turn off a non-believer in the first few words.

How do we speak our faith, how do we tell the story of God's work in and through Jesus Christ without sounding like we are dismissing other faith perspectives? How do we demonstrate God's love and acceptance in a world so prone to draw lines in the sand between the families of faith?

Answering that is perhaps an entire series of sermons but, for today, two words come to mind: Humility and grace.

In speaking our faith with humility, we can recognize in the language we use that God transcends gender, along with everything else. In a multi-faith world, we can find a way to pray to God that doesn't alienate those of other faiths. That is not a retreat or sign of weakness. Rather it sends a message that when we speak our faith, we want to be in conversation with people of other traditions, that we might all grow closer to one another in God.

To speak humbly of faith is also to acknowledge that we can't ever know it all, that we worship a living God who is ever self-revealing.

Three elders from Caldwell and I had the privilege of sitting in on the examination of a group of the confirmation class from Covenant. In reading his faith statement, one young man said without hesitating that he still has lots of questions.

That drew the attention of a white-haired senior elder at the end of table. He said the young man's admission that he still had questions was all he needed to know about whether he was ready to join the church.

The room went silent for a moment. The senior elder looked the young man in the eye and commended him for taking such strong first steps toward having the kind of curious, living faith that can last a lifetime.

The second mark of how we can speak our faith in these pluralistic and complex times is grace, which goes hand in hand with humility.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote:

Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Our world needs a lot more grace, doesn't it, whether it is the divine kind or the more simple human kind?

Local newspaper columnist Mary Newsom recently wrote about what she called a growing “mean streak in America.” She cited responses to her articles and blog postings about urban issues, such as immigration.

In response to a blog about how health care reform is unlikely to include care for illegal immigrants, one reader wrote: *“Somebody here illegally gets sick, let 'em die and ship the body to (the) UNC Med(ical school) for training purposes.”*

Another reader wrote:

“ONE WAY TO ‘FIX’ THIS ILLEGAL PROBLEM IS TO GIVE OUR BORDER PATROLS RIGHTS TO KILL ANYONE THAT CROSSES THE BORDER.”

And another wrote:

“SEND THE ILLEGALS BACK TO THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN!!!! If they are [found here] a second time execute them.”

The ugly truth is that there is a lot of that kind of intolerance and self-centeredness out there. Last week, it even boiled over in the man who shot an abortion doctor in the lobby of his church.

I wonder how much of it is really about fear – fear aggravated by the uncertainty of the recession, perhaps fear on the part of those who see our President taking bold actions in ways they don’t condone or, perhaps, fear caused simply by the fact that the world is so big and fast-moving and complex and pluralistic.

So whether we call it grace, or civility, gentility, good manners or simple mutual respect, our world needs a lot more of it.

All the better news, then, that we are smothered in God’s grace.

Paul’s message to the Corinthians is that they even can be agents of God’s grace.

The same goes for you and me, though it’s hard to imagine, isn’t? God’s grace can work through us and all of our imperfections?

But such is the Christian life – to believe, even understanding we will never get it all ... and to speak with the quiet certainty that the Lord will raise us to be with Christ.

And in it all, thanksgiving to God is increased.

What gifts these are – to believe and, so, to speak.

To God be their glory. Amen.