

Today's Readings

First Reading: Hebrews 9:24 - 28

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Gospel Reading: Mark 12:46-52

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

What do you believe?

I've just come from a conference, a good one, in fact; a gathering of a few hundred people who had come together to talk about insuring that our denomination and those that would follow become fully-inclusive and welcoming churches.

In our denomination, we are approaching another General Assembly, our church-wide gathering of every two years that will take place in Minneapolis, July 3-10, 2010. It's the “big meeting,” and we are in what one might refer to as the “overture season.”

Presbyteries around the country are beginning to consider overtures submitted by their member churches and their Sessions. Literally, hundreds will be proposed across a wide spectrum of desired change or addresses, with dozens making it through the local process into the docket and committees of the 219th General Assembly of the PC(USA).

Among the many overtures will be those related to ordination standards for people who identify themselves as LGBT; a marriage overture to change the Directory of Worship from “restricting” or “defining marriage” as being between a man and a woman; and a revision of the Heidelberg Catechism in our Book of Confessions, which condemns homosexuality, based on an editing revision in the 1960's that was not in the original document. Not a scholarly thing to do. Not an ethical thing to do.

There will be other overtures, but these three were the focus of our meeting, in one way or another. And, throughout the meeting two things were supremely evident: (1) that there is a deep commitment to justice, and (2) there is not agreement as to what people believe is the right way to move forward.

What do you believe?

What do we believe?

Well, it says what we believe at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House, right on the front of our bulletin:

Let's take a look at these beliefs, for just a few minutes. You can read along on your bulletin:

At Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, we share the following beliefs:

1. Jesus is Lord - the love, humility and self-giving of Jesus make him Lord.
2. The Bible is for both personal and social transformation. We interpret scripture with imagination and courage, without rigid literalism.
3. The church of Jesus stays close to the under-privileged peoples of this world and guards against self-righteousness and oppression.
4. Other religious traditions offer wisdom that we honor.
5. The victory belongs to Love; therefore, we are called to a lifestyle of hope, gratitude and service.

Further, we are an inclusive church. At Jan Hus, we welcome people regardless of racial, ethnic, or economic background or sexual orientation into full participation of church life.

These are our beliefs in succinct form

But the next question, for me, at least is: Who are those who hold to these beliefs. Is it you? Is it me? Is it the Session that approved this statement sometime ago? Who do these describe? Our entire congregation? Our staff? Our Session? Me?

And what of believing and beliefs?

What does agreement or disagreement mean for this community that gathers in worship?

I once heard a minister say from the pulpit, "I believe Jesus, but I don't know if I believe *in* Jesus." I thought half the congregation was going to need help to be lifted from the floor back into their seats.

I also thought, what an interesting statement to make – and appreciated his courage in being so transparent in his questioning, yes, his doubt.

I will return to this topic of doubt in a moment, but first I would like to say that I have a plan! And, before I go any further, I immediately think of the phrase we hear now and then, "Humans plan and God laughs!" So, I outline my *plan* with humility and an eye toward flexibility.

What I will do, starting with next week, is to take each of these 5 tenets of beliefs that we boldly display on our bulletin, and integrate them into our readings and studies of the Bible, along with conversations we will have, as a congregation.

Additionally, we will plan a series of “Talk-Backs” following worship and our light lunch, to discuss further these beliefs (and doubts), as well as content of the worship service and sermon. We will begin this next week with the first of our shared beliefs: “Jesus is Lord - the love, humility and self-giving of Jesus make him Lord.” So, please give that some thought in the days ahead and try to set aside a little extra time to “talk-back” next week.

Now, back to beliefs and doubts; back to this morning’s reading of Hebrews.

I have been looking into Hebrews a bit more. There really is considerable doubt about who the author might be. What led many to assign the text to Paul is that there is coherence in his beliefs and those which are integrated in the text of Hebrews. These include:

1. That Christ before the Incarnation (his birth) possessed divine glory and shared in the creation.
2. That Christ became truly human
3. That the death of Christ was the central part of his mission
4. That his death affected redemption for our sins
5. That Christ intercedes for us
6. That the law was shown to be ineffective by the revelation of Christ
7. That faith is the central response required of all humans
8. That readers are immature
9. That the heavenly Jerusalem is in our possession [the kingdom of God is at hand].

The writer’s problem or provocation to write, at least we think so, is that early believers at this time, thought to be around the Second Century, were becoming a bit disillusioned with the new faith, longing for some of the more concrete power and prestige and familiarity that came with a Judaism, based on the authority of the Mosaic Law. Put another way, the shift from Moses to Jesus, the old and tried and trusted to the new and “riskiness” of Christianity, was not without its sacrifices and isolation.

The challenge the author of Hebrews faced was to demonstrate that the old they knew so well was nothing near the new that was of Jesus and his promise. The old sanctuary had been replaced by one in heaven; the high priests of the temple had been replaced by the one and highest of all priests, who now sat at the right hand of God; that the sacrifices, prayers, and intercessions of the old ways – now, in Jesus, had more power than ever before.

In some ways, my minister friend, had the same trouble as those to whom the author of Hebrews was speaking. While many believed what Jesus taught, they had difficulty believing in him, especially when times got tough.

And, you know, doubt is always part of the journey. The expression of such doubt is not to be avoided, but embraced. Belief without the doubt process can never achieve faith – at least, for the great many of us, including me.

And, as we talk in the weeks ahead about our beliefs at Jan Hus and those we bring with us from our other traditions, we will have to talk about the relationship of beliefs to faith - and our faith, as gathered.

A word: Don't expect more answers than questions, but I promise the questions will be interesting enough in themselves, even without answers.

And, for many of us, the road to belief and faith – not surprisingly – comes from a place of poverty. For some of us, we needed to get to the lowest of places, places where all the trappings of comfort, success, meaning, - even security - have been removed, literally or figuratively, in order that we might come face to face with who we are in the presence of God – no buffers, no insulation, just wrestling, like Jacob, with the Stranger in the night.

Whether we reach the “one on one” with God in a graceful or messy way, the result is always the same: some variation on a sense of peace, calm, humility and gratitude that initiates service in ways that reflect God's love as we know it and God.

In Mark's Gospel reading of today, the poor widow, out of her poverty gives more than others out of their abundance. Or, in the twists of message that Jesus seems to love in his parables, she had more in the fullness of humility of her faith – than all the emptiness in the hubris and riches of the Scribes.

Go figure.

It is, upside-down. Yes, the kingdom of God is at hand – “down-here” so to speak.

Or, so we believe....more to come.