

August 9, 2015  
Falcon Heights Church UCC  
Falcon Heights, MN  
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Pentecost 11  
Beliefs Month - Jesus  
Matthew 3:1-2, 13-17 (Baptism)  
Matthew 17:1-8 (Transfiguration)

Exploring Our Beliefs Series, Part 2:  
JESUS CHRIST: Who Is This Jesus?

Perhaps this is your first time worshipping here, or maybe you haven't joined us in a while. You are entering a conversation we are having about the shared Christian beliefs among us as a congregation. Many churches, and I would include this particular church, see Christianity "as a subplot to the story of (their) particular congregation." As the UCC pastor and author Anthony Robinson bluntly states: "The stories of your particular church are not the content of the Christian faith." (Robinson, "What's Theology Got to Do with It?") In asking you to articulate your own beliefs, the Discovery Team is working to guide a "clarifying of purpose" process between called pastors. Their intent is not to devise a test of faith. The invitation is to get clear about what is at the center of your life together as a congregation.

"Bringing in more members and raising more money" is not the answer to "why" you are a church. Neither is simply saying, "We are here to help others." What's the purpose; what's the why?

I am coming to see that people get involved and stay committed to a particular faith community these days because they know the *why* and agree with why you do it. We usually want to describe to people what our church does (we meet the needs of all ages, we are open to everyone) and how we do it (we're friendly, we have active children's, teen and senior programs, we collect a lot of food for the needy). But what in the world juices and drives all that activity? Don't leave it to the evangelicals to be the only ones to say: This is about my experience of God acting in my life, about the transforming power of God's love and forgiveness in my life, and my call to respond in service in Christ's name.

A liberal and progressive congregation like Falcon Heights Church has important theological things to say about why it does what it does. And your church constitution is an articulate and powerful guide in this regard. It affirms two general areas of belief. First: the belief that each member has "the freedom to interpret God's Truth as God gives them each light and wisdom." But your constitution doesn't stop there. It continues that sentence: "This church recognizes and accepts as the basis of our common purpose, faith and covenant found in the Statement of Faith" of the United Church of Christ. Your constitution affirms individual freedom, guided by God's light and wisdom, not just your own rational perspective, to interpret God's Truth. *And*, your constitution affirms a shared sense of what that truth is.

We are digging deeper into your “why,” that shared truth that unites you. Today we move into this second section of that UCC Statement of Faith, which is included in the opening portion of the Falcon Heights Church Constitution, and talks about Jesus Christ. I invite you to turn to the front of the bulletin, and let’s read it together. Each of the words may not be exactly reflective of your particular beliefs at this particular time, but I ask that we “try them on” together.

*In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior,  
you have come to us  
and shared our common lot,  
conquering sin and death  
and reconciling the world to yourself.*

Now take a look at the words on the paper hangings in the front of the Sanctuary: Jesus Christ, man, Savior. Crucified. Risen. Pictures of the earth made by our children: God, you have come to us. The realm of mystery and otherness intersecting with our visible, physical world. You have shared our common lot. Here. On Earth. Conquering. Reconciling. More here than one sermon, for sure.

Anthony B. Robinson suggests that the “who is Jesus” question includes both our understanding of his person and also of his work, what Jesus does to help us. The early church spent a lot of time trying to figure out Jesus the person, with lots of debates, and church councils and formalized creeds swirling around this double identity of Jesus being both human and divine. Then we have the whole reality of governing Empire becoming the decider about what was the correct view and what was heresy, which is in large part a complicated and horrific legacy we need to own and repent. Again, another sermon!

Robinson suggests that it is these two biblical stories, of Jesus’ baptism at the beginning of his ministry and his transfiguration in front of several disciples, that can help us with this perplexing question of “Who was Jesus?” Think of a line, a continuum, with “Jesus was human” on one end, and “Jesus was divine” on the other. It might be interesting to actually line ourselves up and see where we would all stand on that continuum. Most liberal and progressive Protestant churches lean more heavily towards the human side, and speak of Jesus as being primarily a moral example and teacher. Other traditions would line up more on the divine side.

That Jesus went to John the Baptist, who invited people to repent from their sins and be baptized, was a big problem in the first generations following Jesus’ death. How could one who is also divine, and therefore sinless, feel the need to repent of his sins and be baptized? Personally, I am not troubled by this, as in his humanness he must have had a sense of his own mistakes, his own sinfulness. That John baptizes him, and that Jesus comes out of the waters of the River Jordan with an emerging sense of his public ministry, is okay with us in the more liberal church. And this sentiment is echoed in those words “shared our

common lot” in the statement. We think of him as experiencing all the urges, temptations and challenges of human life, even if he did only have to deal with this until his early 30s, never had a mortgage, didn’t have to raise teenagers or be in a long-term marriage, as far as we can tell. I would say that most of us here like our Jesus *human*; we get uncomfortable with this “Son of God,” “no one comes to the Father but through me,” virgin birth language, and are just not sure what to make of the resurrection accounts. We like our Jesus human. Yes, Example and Teacher!

Anthony Robinson has a few challenging things to say about this emphasis. Seeing Jesus only as a good example and a teacher assumes that we need reminding that “life’s purpose is to love God and neighbor...the focus of this powerful teacher and inspiring example is to change our hearts and minds. We need one who teaches us the pattern of the life God intends, and we need an inspiring example of selfless love” (“What’s Theology Got to Do with It?”). But how is that working for us, here? Are we ready to admit that we follow this example in this congregation? Are people willing to admit that they have not acted out of selfless love sometimes and that hurtful things have been said through the years and especially in the recent past? Is this church ready to admit that many people have kept quiet and allowed bullying to happen? That some people continue to feel ignored or even shunned? Ouch, yes. This is about human sin. Jesus teaches us “the pattern of the life God intends.” Are we willing to really follow that example and those teachings? That’s a tall order.

But wait, I’m not even to Robinson’s most challenging statement yet! “Perhaps not surprisingly,” he writes, this view of Jesus as Example and Teacher “has had strong appeal among the more highly educated as well as those who place a high value on reason and rational understanding of religion...it may not fully address the human experience that is other than rational. Even more seriously, this model underestimates the power and depth of human sin.” Do we need more good advice, asks Robinson, or do we need Good News that our sinful choices can be acknowledged, confessed, repented and transformed?

Balancing out this view of Jesus’ humanness was the growing awareness, particularly by his followers after his resurrection, that Jesus somehow still lived among them, forgave them, loved them, guided them, changed them. Language about divine savior and Lord, words used by the earliest of Christian communities, reflected their profound sense that Jesus, *not Caesar*, was their Savior and Lord. Following the Risen Christ meant that they confronted not just their own individual mistakes and need for transformation. They also were called to confront the corrupt political structures and injustices of their day. They refused to proclaim that the Empire’s Caesar was their Savior and Lord. They were called to be part of transforming the world under God’s reign of compassion, peace and restorative justice, by following Jesus, their Savior and Lord.

And so the early Christians also claimed that Jesus, the Risen Christ, truly was divine in some mysterious way. We don't know if the biblical story of Jesus transfigured gets read back into Jesus' public ministry, or if it actually happened that way to those particular disciples. Jesus' face and figure taking on a visible radiance, the figures of Israel's founding leader, Moses, and an important prophet, Elijah, appearing at Jesus side. All of this speaking to a mind-blowing sense that Jesus was somehow....yes....divine as well as human. And those of us in this 21st century are left to grapple with all these titles: Savior, conqueror, Lord, Messiah, anointed one, Christ.

"Shared our common lot," says our Statement of Faith. This is described as a deed of God. "We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify," we read last week. This is listed as a deed, a doing, of God. "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared out common lot." This is the stuff of incarnation. Or, as Robinson puts it, a God who "risked full entry into our lives....by embracing humanity and by sharing it with us...Are our doubts (about this) a form of self-protection" from the God who yearns to be fully involved in our lives and who would change us by that involvement?

Let's continue the conversation about how God is revealing God's Truth to you. Come join me after worship, as we talk together about our beliefs about Jesus. Amen.