**When Correct Beliefs Aren’t Enough**

**Micah 6:6-8; James 2:14-17; Matthew 7:15-21**

Rev. J. Douglas Paterson

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Brian McLaren in his book “The Great Spiritual Migration” begins with this story.

Imagine that you just bought a twelve-pack of Coke. Each virgin can sits before you, bubbling with the promise of caffeinated, carbonated, carbohydrate-rich pleasure. You remove the first can from the cardboard box and pop it open. *Fizz.*

You lift the can to your lips, but the liquid tastes salty and foul. Shocked, you throw it away and open the second can. You take a sip and immediately you spit it out; it tastes like spoiled mill. You open a third can and lift it cautiously to your lips but don’t drink: the smell of carbonated sewage disgusts you. If the fourth and fifth cans greet you with the scent of gasoline and vinegar, how likely is it that you will open the sixth through twelfth cans, each of which has the classic, sweet, velvety, tongue-tingling taste you were expecting?

Now imagine you call Coca-Cola customer service and share with them your experience.

Customer Service: Coca-Cola World Headquarters. How may I help you?

You: I just bought a twelve-pack of Coke that tasted terrible.

Customer Service: I’m sorry to hear that. What color were the cans?

You: The cans were normal – bright red with white lettering.

Customer Service: Well, that is the most important thing. Was the cardboard box sound – the box that contained the twelve cans?

You: Yes. The cardboard box was fine. It was the taste that was the prob—

Customer Service: Thanks for calling! I’m glad the cans were red and the box was sturdy. Enjoy Coke and have a nice day!

McLaren says: A brand like Coke only has meaning because it is linked to an essential quality or qualities for a soft drink: taste – not the can. With a politician: policies, effectiveness, and character count – not age, hairstyle or skin color. With a bicycle: speed, weight, and comfort are paramount, not the saddle color.

And what are the qualities of Christian faith that really matter, regardless of the packaging?

(*The Great Spiritual Migration, pg. 2)*

That essentially is the question we are trying to answer in this sermon series “Faith on the Grow.” You see, I am convinced that God is doing a new thing, which is sort of like saying the ocean is wet. God is always doing a new thing because that is the nature of God. God is creator and is creating. As we said last week, we do not have a static God. Therefore, our faith cannot be static either.

Last week we asked ourselves, “Is it time to move?” We read the story of God calling Abraham to move out of his father’s household to a new land where Abraham will become the patriarch of a great nation. So what makes Abraham the patriarch of a new, great nation? Why wasn’t Terah the patriarch of a new, great nation since he was the father of Abraham – the patriarch of the patriarch? Or Nahor, the father of Terah and grandfather of Abraham – the patriarch of the patriarch of the patriarch?

The reason Abraham is the patriarch of the Hebrew people is because God’s call for him to move was more than just a relocation project. It was a major shift in the evolution of faith – one God, not a polytheistic system. A God who wants to be in covenant with humanity, not a God whose whims are to be appeased by a cowering humanity. God’s call to Abraham was to move to a fuller understanding of God the creator. And that wasn’t the last time that God called humanity to a fuller understanding.

In our Christian tradition I think it is pretty safe to say that God was doing a new thing in Jesus Christ. God does not rest on God’s laurels of creating a beautifully, mysterious, unfathomable universe, but continues to move to create a relationship with humanity in order to bring creation into fullness. And I’m not even sure what that means, because I don’t have the words or knowledge to describe God’s end game. I do believe that God is doing something new in our era.

It’s not like we are going to wake up a decade from now and be able to say, “Aha! Look at what God did!” But I do believe that 200 or 300 years from now, those who call themselves Christian will look back on this time period and say, “That is when God started doing a new thing with the Christian Church. Like the reformation 500 years before, the early part of the 21st century the Spirit of God worked in the Church to challenge belief systems that were archaic, outdated, harmful, and kept people from experiencing the grace of Jesus Christ.

I am sure that I am making that sound much more dramatic than it will probably be. After all, God’s Spirit consistently works in the Church to root out archaic and harmful understandings of the Gospel. But there seems to be something special and unique right now that is pushing Christians to move and to challenge a belief system that no longer seems relevant or life-giving.

Don't get me wrong; I am not saying Christianity is no longer relevant or life-giving. But I do believe, often, the way we practice Christianity is not exactly what God had in mind. And we seem to live in a time where there is an openness to listen to God anew and challenge the priorities of our belief system.

So 500 years ago Martin Luther did the Christian Church a great service. Luther saw the abuses that power and authority too often create. It is almost a given, isn’t it? Give a person or an entity too much power and authority and it inevitably corrupts itself, because keeping power and authority becomes more important than using power and authority for the benefit of all.

Luther became outraged how the Church was basically selling salvation. Not to over simplify the issue, but no matter what you did, no matter how bad you were, if you gave enough money to the church you were absolved and saved from the wrath of hell, because the church acted like it had the authority to do so.

Luther said, “No, no, no, no, no! Read the Scripture. We are saved by faith alone, not because you have the means to buy off the church – to pay indulgences. Or more generally, we are saved by faith, not by works. Luther believed we don’t have the capacity to save ourselves by our works. Only in the faith of what God accomplished in Jesus Christ are we saved.

I happen to agree with Luther. And that was one of the major faith evolutionary moments in the Christian Church. However, I think the pendulum has swung too far. Faith in what God was accomplishing in Jesus has evolved into a system of believing. So it is not in faith that God is gracious and is working out our salvation in Jesus, which in large part still remains a mystery to me. But salvation comes from having the correct belief about who God is and who Jesus is and how salvation works. And therefore the Church has set itself up again as the gatekeeper of salvation instead of the conduit I believe it is called to be.

Here is an example: “fundamentalism.” Fundamentalism is a common concept in the Christian Church, and part of the purpose of this sermon series is to begin the conversation again about what is fundamental in our relationship with God. It is a question that was asked 150 years ago in the midst of the enlightenment and the modern era. Science and critical thinking were challenging some of the long held beliefs like God created the universe in six days.

Because Luther helped us understand that Scripture should be our authority there was a reaction to modern science and modernity that challenged some of these long held beliefs. So about 100 years ago in the Church fundamentalists moved from being small “f” to capital “F” Fundamentalists – moving from an adjective to a noun. You are only a true and saved Christian if you were a Fundamentalist. If you correctly believe in a few core beliefs, which were:

* The inerrancy of the Bible
* The literal nature of the biblical accounts, especially regarding Christ's miracles and the Creation account in Genesis
* The virgin birth of Jesus
* The bodily resurrection and physical return of Jesus
* The substitutionary atonement of Jesus on the cross

In and of themselves, they are not bad beliefs. They are an attempt to help explain this wonderful mystery that is God. But instead of treating them as an attempt to fathom an unfathomable God, they became God. Instead of God being the source of salvation, correct beliefs become the source of salvation. And much like the indulgences during Luther’s time, as long as you have the correct belief system, how you behave seems almost secondary.

And so hypocrisy raises its ugly head. As Christians we always have to deal with hypocrisy. We are an imperfect people professing the perfect. There will always be hypocrisy, but we don’t have to shoot ourselves in the foot. Part of this new thing that I think God is calling us to is actually an old thing, as attested to by our Scriptures we read. The priority of believing must make way to the priority of behaving

By “believing” I mean belief system. How we behave in response to God’s graceful movement in Jesus is more important than what we believe about it.

Isn’t that why Jesus got into so much trouble with the religious authorities of his day? Because he believed that people were more important than religious dogma? Because good behavior was more important than good belief systems?

One of the things I have admired about the United Methodist church is that it is not a confessional church. That is you do not need to sign on to a certain set of beliefs like the Apostles Creed. We celebrate the ancient creeds, and they are a part of our liturgy, as a faithful witness to the struggle of our fore parents in faith to make sense of God’s ever present and moving Spirit in our lives.

But sometimes there are moments in history when new knowledge sheds light on old dogma and we have to rethink. You are all aware of the conniptions the Church went through when Copernicus declared that the sun does not revolve around the earth but that the earth revolves around the sun. That is the earth is not the center of the universe and all the description of the God-made universe in the Bible were rendered wrong.

You know what we discovered in that process? That this universe, this creation of God’s is even grandeur and more mysterious than we could have imagined, which means God is even grandeur and more mysterious that we can imagine.

Having a fine box and a good can is needful in some ways, if Coke is going to deliver the most important thing – a good tasting soda. But the packaging doesn’t replace what we buy Coke for. Belief systems are necessary to give us guidance. But Jesus is very clear. “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of God, but only the one who does the will of God.” It is your gracious movement toward others that show your real faith. That’s why I love my father-in-law’s faith statement that we said earlier. “I believe that beliefs are true only when confirmed in the life-style and behavior of the believer.”

I pray that will be true in your life and in mine. Amen.