

August 14th, 2022

Hebrews 4:12-13 “The Light of Scripture”

If you’ve been coming to worship any time in the last seven weeks, you know that we’ve been working our way through the Disciples Affirmation of Faith that’s found on page 355 of our Chalice Hymnal. You also know that as a movement the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) rejects creeds which, by definition, are “formal statements of Christian beliefs.” Historians say that the first official creed of the church was created in AD 325 at the Council of Nicaea in Northwestern Turkey. Creeds spell out *exactly* what ones is to believe about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Church in that order. For the past seven Sundays I’ve been trying to convince you that our Disciples Affirmation of Faith is *not* a creed although I’m sure that there are those who are thinking, “Yeah, but if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck it’s probably a duck.” Or a creed. That’s fair. But whereas creeds are tests of orthodoxy based on what one is expected to *believe*, our affirmation of faith is a statement about what we *affirm*. In our statement of faith, we *confess* that Jesus is the Christ. We *rejoice* in God and God’s covenant of love. We are in *communion* with the Holy Spirit that joins us together in discipleship. You’re not going to find the word “believe” in this affirmation of faith, because once you use that word, you’re going to have to use it to determine who is in and who is out, thus making our circle of fellowship smaller and smaller. That doesn’t work out for a movement that was established to make our circle of fellowship bigger and bigger. And that’s where we’ll begin this week.

The first line of this week’s stanza is, “Within the universal church.” “Universal Church” is a red-flag phrase for some Christians. When some of our more “apocalyptically-focused” brothers and sisters in Christ hear, “Universal church” they think it sounds too much like the “Anti-Christ sponsored, one-world religion, one-world government system” that you read about in the book of Revelation. Excuse me, I should say, “that we are *told about* in the book of Revelation by people who say only they have the correct interpretation of that book.” Now,

before you say, “Okay Jesse, are you going to pick on the folks who like *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* books this week? Are you going have one of your little rants about Christians who seem to spend more time and effort preparing for the end of the world rather than figuring out how to make *this* world a better place?” Maybe a little.

Here's the thing – I can't really pick on these folks in good conscience because in the early years of *our* movement, we were *totally* obsessed with the end of the world and our role in preparing people for the apocalypse. Alexander Campbell, one of our founders, had a magazine called the *Millennial Harbinger*! The title itself says, “Hi! We are here to help move things along so Christ can come back sooner than later!” You should see all the funky charts and graphs and timelines that our founders drew up in those early days. It's wild. They thought for sure they knew when Christ would return! But I shouldn't be too harsh with them because that was kind of a trend among churches in the 19th century, especially here in the states. Go figure, right? The 1800s saw the rise of millennialism in a lot of churches. “Millennial” in this context doesn't mean “young people between the age of 27-41 who get blamed for all the world's problems.” In this case, “millennium” refers to the 1,000 year reign of Christ that will happen between the time he returns and when God's final judgement of humankind occurs at the end of time. There were entire denominations and movements in the mid-to-late 1800s that formed because people believed it was their highest priority to prepare the way for Christ's return. Get out there and bring in as many souls to Christ as possible so they don't miss out when Jesus returns. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons are probably two of the best-known of these churches to come out of this period in the mid-to-late 1800s. And we all know how hard they work at getting people to come to church. They wrote the playbook for knock-on-you-door evangelism! So yes. Full disclosure. The obsession with Christ's return was a big part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in its formative years. I guess the reason we don't talk about it much is that maybe we're a little embarrassed about it, especially in the last few decades. You ever wonder why some Christians don't seem to be that

concerned about running out of natural resources or being good stewards of the Earth? Well, why should we conserve resources if we believe that Christ is coming back any day to take us all away from this place? But ... that being said, I don't think we should sweep the history of our millennialist beliefs under the rug and totally dismiss them.

Back to this idea of the universal church though. Please don't get that mixed up with "Universalist" as in "Unitarian Universalists." That's an entirely different movement that came along in the early 1960s. For us, the "universal church" does not mean a "one world religion." We definitely hang our hats on the Jesus hat-rack. It's just that our founders thought there were too many denominations among Christians and that there was plenty of room at the table for *all* of them. So "within the universal church, we receive the gift of ministry and the light of scripture" means that we, along with most other Christian denominations world-wide, affirm two things – The gift of ministry and the light of scripture. And this is where we get to talk about the third big "sacrament" of our tradition. We've already talked about baptism. Last week we talked about the Lord's Supper. The third one that we're dealing with this week is "ministry," or as our affirmation of faith says, "the *gift* of ministry."

Here's something you might not know. I am not the minister of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Chico. You might be thinking, "Well who do you think the minister of First Christian Church in Chico is?" Hang on to your hat, you might not like the answer. In my estimation, *you* are. *Who was he looking at when he said that? Peggy? Diane? Bill?* The lack of distinction between second person singular and second person plural in English comes up once again. When I say "you" I'm saying "y'all." You are all ministers. I am too, but what sets me apart is that I am the *pastor*. According to our tradition, *everyone* receives the gift of ministry even if they're a Presbyterian or a Methodist or a Baptist or an Episcopalian. Says so right here in our Disciples affirmation. And just like they used to say in those 1970s Ginsu knife

commercials, “But wait, there’s more!” We in the universal church not only receive the gift of ministry, we also have the light of scripture.

The Bible is another big deal in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As our scripture in Hebrews says, we believe that the word of God, as found in scripture, is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” It’s not just an old book of stories that we refer to now and then because it contains some solid moral teaching and good direction. It is the road map to our faith and practice. It is at the center of our understanding of God. Our founders often said things like, “No book but the Bible, no creed but Christ and no law but love.” “Where the scriptures speak, we speak, where the scriptures are silent we are silent.” “Bible names for Bible things.” In the early days, we were often called, “the people of the Book” which at the time was kind of derogatory. But eventually we said, “Yeah. That’s a fair assessment. We *are* a people of the book.” It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path as the Psalmist writes.

So let’s put these things together. As a movement ... as Disciples of Christ, we recognize that we are all part of a bigger body of Christians that we call “the church universal.” Again, we are not the only Christians, we are Christians only. We also understand that we are all commissioned to ministry and that “ministry” is going to look different for every Christian because we all have different gifts and graces for ministry. Our job isn’t to tell you what that ministry is or what it will look like, our job is to help you discover what that ministry is and equip you to accomplish it. We understand that the best tool for us to accomplish this ministry is the Bible. It is our light. It is our playbook for ministry. It is our road map to navigate life’s challenges.

Here's where I'm going to go off the rails a little bit. I think we should reach back and re-claim some of that “millennialist energy” that we had once upon a time to help us as we consider our “gift of ministry.” And no, I’m not saying that we should dress in business formal and walk

door to door using terrible boundaries to win converts. But I do want to look to the light of scripture to help us understand how *we* can be “millennial harbingers.” To do this, we’ve got to use that light of scripture to reveal what the Kingdom of God is. According to some, the Kingdom of God is a heavenly realm that exists outside and apart from our earthly realm. Some Christians believe that this earth is no good. They believe that sin has separated us from God so much that there’s no way that God could redeem all of “this.” I was reading an article on the rise of White Christian Nationalism in our country and the author wrote – “Some Christians don’t think life is supposed to be good. They think life on earth is supposed to be a crucible that tests if you’re fit for heaven. If these kind of Christians take over society the quality of life for everyone is going to steeply decline.” She goes on to write, “If you think our society is obsessed with punishment now ... these people literally think that death for a believer is a merciful release from a world of earthly sin. They think death should be looked forward to. They don’t want to improve the world they want it to end in apocalypse.”

Jesus, in John 14:1-3 tells his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” But did Jesus say that this “place” he was preparing for us was God’s kingdom? No. Whenever Jesus speaks of God’s Kingdom, he does so in parables like he did in Matthew 13. There he says the kingdom of God *is at hand*. It’s so close you can touch it. It’s slowly and subversively working its way into our realm like a pinch of yeast in dough or a weed that takes over a field. People think that the Book of Revelation is the hardest book in the New Testament to understand. Not really. You can summarize that book in five words - “In the end, God wins.” But it’s not because God beams the faithful up and out of this world.

Revelation 21:1-4 says, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’”

We’re not going to be “beamed up” into God’s kingdom. God’s kingdom is already in the process of making its way here to replace the old kingdoms of the earth. Our job as “millennial harbingers” isn’t to go out and take the world by force and stage our own version of Margaret Atwood’s *A Handmaid’s Tale*. Our job is to use the light of scripture that is available to us all ... and our gifts and graces for ministry that we all have been given to be the hands and feet of Christ on this earth. We do this by aligning ourselves with God so that this shift from the Kingdoms of the Earth to the Reign of God can continue to happen in God’s time. Let us keep our eyes fixed on this mission. As the body of Christ ... as part of the church universal ... let us work together to usher in an age of God’s love and mercy.