

SERMON TITLE- "What Do We Believe?"

TEXT- 1 Peter 3:15

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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"Are you my mother?" the young bird asks. Having fallen from its nest upon hatching, it encounters a kitten, a hen, a dog, and a cow, an old car, a boat, a plane, and finally a power shovel. At first glance each appears to be a potential mother but alas each turns away from the seeking bird. It is a poignant and enduring children's story.

It is a children's story but it is a story that occurs to me when I think of modern Christianity. The place where it strikes me directly is when I meet with young couples, from outside the church and we go over marriage preparation. I will ask them what their church background is and the answer I get back is mostly puzzlement- "I think we might be protestant or something."

Almost all of them consider themselves to be Christians but really have no idea what that means- let alone what the various different groups that call themselves Christian might be.

The problem is- many people today- even Christians who go to church on a regular basis- don't actually know who they are- except in the most general terms. When it suits them everyone is a Christian and when it doesn't suit them- it seems no one is. [Celebrity Apprentice- one of the contestants [Stephen Baldwin] is a "born again" Christian. That became the subject of a lot of discussion but at the end- the villain [Peirs Morgan]- says, "So what all this about him being a Christian- I am one too! I'm Catholic after all!"

It is quite a picture of the state of our times. When it comes to faith we are wandering around wondering who we are.

There was a time when the Christian world had neatly defined boundaries- we may have been Catholics, Lutherans, Pentecostal, Orthodox, or Mennonites . . . but we were something. Now- who knows what we are?

In reality- the boundaries are gone.

At first we may be glad for this- after all hasn't sectarianism been the bane of Christianity since churches started splitting from each other nearly 2000 years ago?

"Why are there so many different kinds of churches, anyway?" We've all heard the question and we have all walked away less than satisfied with our answers.

The new answer is simple- "The differences don't matter anymore- we're all really the same. Don't worry about it!"

And so people drift between churches and denominations apparently seamlessly. It no longer matters if the latest, greatest church is Reformed, Baptist, or Anglican. Frankly the less links a church has to formal institutions- the better. If the preacher is inspiring and the music is invigorating- no one seems to care. They must be our mothers if they make us feel cozy, safe and feed us something that touches the gnawing in our bellies. Isn't that the essence of motherhood?

But all is not well in this new world without boundaries. While the various sects of Christendom made us answer vexing questions- there were also good things they gave their followers.

#1. They gave them structures to respond to the societies they lived in and

#2. They gave them a language to actually discuss the issues they faced.

The flaw of our new, non-sectarian world reveals itself in both areas.

#1. Western Christianity also blends seamlessly into culture at large and here it now struggles to define its own ethics. In fact a cigar, a glass of wine and a generous salting of profanity is the new cool for the emerging Christian male. Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course.

#2. But, how do we even talk about it?

As Alice discovered when she tried to debate the Red Queen- real discussions require more than just common words- they require a common language. And this is what we have lost. We have the same words but we no longer have the same implicit meanings and because of this we have lost the most elementary of meaningful debate.

So who are we, and what is our "mother"? This is not a random search for meaning. The nest in which we were born has left deep marks in our beings. It has shaped us into who we are. We are a people with an identity. We have a mother!

The baby bird was not a cat, dog, airplane or even a chicken and when it finally saw its mother, it knew.

So we are going to do a series, looking at the question “Who Are We?” and specifically around, what we believe.

As most of you know- we are a MB Church and so what will follow will necessarily reflect a MB theology- however what I will not do- is argue that it is correct because of that. In fact I will not be presenting it as MB theology- but rather at core Christian teaching that goes back to the very beginning of the Church- back to Jesus and the NT.

Today we lay the background for this series and I want to give 3 Biblical reasons why this is a very important thing to do.

It begins with a text, nearly 3500 years old. Going back to the very beginnings of the people of Israel- back when it was making its famous journey from Egypt to its eventual homeland- the land of Canaan.

At the end of their 40-year travel, Moses their leader preaches a long sermon- which is essentially the book of Deuteronomy.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. Deuteronomy 6:4-9

#1. We Just Need To Know What We Believe

This is an important passage for us as a church. It is on this basis that we take our children’s ministry as seriously as we do. “Impress them on your children . . .”

That is the assignment God gives His people. We have undertaken to bring the Lord’s Prayer into our worship service every week. Why? so that our children will have it’s words impressed on their hearts.

As the children go out- the CM team has also undertaken to add to that and taught the children the 23rd Psalm.

But we would be seriously missing the point of this passage if we missed the fact that our children are to be the recipients of teaching that first goes into our own hearts and minds.

We are first of all to have them on our own hearts. We are to do this in every way that we can. We are to do so creatively and repetitively.

We live in a world that has all kinds of knowledge at its fingertips. Anyone who has access to a computer can get all kinds of information- and accurate information- very quickly. If I want to research a fact about Mennonites, all I have to do is type “Mennonite” into Google and instantly a million websites with information on Mennonites, are at my finger tips.

The same is true of the Bible. I no longer need a stack of thick books to do Bible research- all I need to do is find the right site and the best research on any Greek or Hebrew word is instantly on m screen. I have access to any translation and 100s of commentaries.

But none of that really helps me fulfill the instruction that God gave through Moses. In fact having so much information so easily accessible can mask the fact that the information is not actually there within us.

To get it into us we need to follow the instructions and by all kinds of methods find ways of inserting them into our hearts and minds.

We do it be conscientious means- by writing them down where they are visible, by repeating them over and over again, by teaching them to others and also, as we are going to do in the weeks ahead- by having them taught- in detail.

The specific aspect of our learning process- in the weeks ahead however, is to place the words of God into a context. Preaching is not just about reciting Scripture- it is about explaining how things fit together.

As we went through 1 & 2 Peter and as we looked at the meaning of Easter, we repeatedly came across phrases like- “this is of first importance.” Regularly the NT writers, such as Paul particularly, spent time explaining how things work together. Not only do we need to memorize specific Scriptures- we also need to understand what they mean.

The result of that- among other things is recorded in Psalm 119

I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Psalm 119:10-11

There is no way to have God's words in our hearts- except by putting them in there. And when they are in there- they strengthen us from the inside out.

In a world that has lost patience with this process we are going to take it seriously. It is just plain good for us.

But there is more and the next reason is a little more subtle and it illustrates in reverse early in Genesis. The context of the story is after the Great Flood people came up with a plan to prevent future calamity. So how do we prevent dying in a flood? Build something really high so that we can ride it out.

And so they built a tower called the Tower of Babel. God was not impressed with this plan and the story goes on from there.

" . . . Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. Genesis 11:7-9

#2. We Need To Understand Each Other- This Takes Work

What is the gist of this lesson? To get things done- we really need to understand each other.

I mentioned the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland. If you read the exchange between Alice and the Queen you find that it descends into nonsense- even though they are both speaking English. Why is this? Because they may be using the same word- but their meanings are not at all agreed on.

One of their conversations went like this-

When she got back to the Cheshire Cat, she was surprised to find quite a large crowd collected round it: there was a dispute going on between the executioner, the King, and the Queen, who were all

talking at once, while all the rest were quite silent, and looked very uncomfortable.

The moment Alice appeared, she was appealed to by all three to settle the question, and they repeated their arguments to her, though, as they all spoke at once, she found it very hard indeed to make out exactly what they said.

The executioner's argument was, that you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he wasn't going to begin at *his* time of life.

The King's argument was, that anything that had a head could be beheaded, and that you weren't to talk nonsense.

The Queen's argument was, that if something wasn't done about it in less than no time she'd have everybody executed, all round. (It was this last remark that had made the whole party look so grave and anxious.)

Alice could think of nothing else to say but `It belongs to the Duchess: you'd better ask *her* about it.'

Many of the conversations that take place around faith are, I believe variations on that kind of silliness.

I think that this is a very big problem in our world today. When we are in the Church, we have Church language and those who are not familiar with church language don't understand what we are talking about.

Whenever you change settings you will pick up different language. Each trade or academic discipline has its own terms that it uses- often with very specific meanings. If we don't understand what they are- then we will not only fail to understand what is being said- they can easily make terrible mistakes.

And how do we learn to use the same language? We learn it by discussing things together.

One of the really satisfying things of good discussions are those moments when it seems like a light goes off and we finally understand. "Oh, now I get it! When you said this- you meant that!"

This happens in informal settings but there is also a place for formal settings.

From the very beginning Christians set up schools wherever they went. Why schools? Because schools teach things in ways that just discussions cannot do. When you go to school, you are told what to read. You don't get to read just whatever you want- and that is a good thing. It makes you try to see and understand things the way other people do.

So in some ways for the next weeks- the sermons will be a little bit in the teaching format.

We want to understand our language from a "school" end in this series- so that we really do understand, not just the words, but the language.

But there is one more reason that the Bible gives for us to undertake a study like this. For this we go back to Peter-

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

But do this with gentleness and respect, 1 Peter 3:15

It is important for us to simply know what we believe.

It is important for us to understand each other.

But also-

#3. We Need It To Explain Our Faith To Others

The Bible is so clear- we do not have all the blessings of our relationship with God just to ourselves. Yes, first of all it is for us to understand and receive the blessings of this relationship. From there the blessing extends to the family of God that we have been made part of.

We as a family need to understand who we are, what our values are, and what it means when we talk to each other.

But it does not end there. As God's people we are on a mission to bring the Good News that we have received to those who have not yet done so.

This is central to who we are as God's people.

If this is the case- then the next important aspect of getting our language figured out is captured in Peter's instruction. We are to "be prepared to give an answer to everyone."

This will not happen if we don't give it some thought. We need to understand, we need to understand each other- and

we keep thinking about ways to make ourselves understood to those we come into contact with.

There is a beautiful passage in the Book of Romans that explains this. It begins with the Gospel declaration-

For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13

What wonderful news! But that leads to an obvious question- in fact a series of questions-

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?

And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?

And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

And how can they preach unless they are sent?

As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Romans 10:14-15

We are to be people with "beautiful feet" And where do we get beautiful feet? We get them when we have taken the time to-

1. Understand
2. Learn to discuss
3. Explain the Good News which we have been given.