January 4, 2015

Matthew 23:13-15, 25-28

What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Matthew 23:13-15, 25-28 New Revised Standard Version

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

For the next seven weeks, we are going to be looking at what Christians need to believe. I am using a book written by Martin Thielen, *What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* as the basis for this study. I encourage you to download and read it or join the Sunday School classes that will be discussing this book as well. This week we will focus on a few things that Christians don’t need to believe.

Sometimes I wonder if I had not grown up in a Christian home with Christian parents who brought me (okay, sometimes dragged me), would I be a Christian today? When I read the news I do not like the Christians that I see.

There were some difficult things that happened in our world over the Christmas holidays. When AirAsia flight 8501 disappeared I could not believe it and my heart grieved. And then I read an article on cnn.com about a family that missed the flight. The article began, “Some call it serendipity, others divine intervention. Either way, circumstances prevented two families from boarding doomed AirAsia Flight 8501.” Ms. Ferdiningsih said, “It was no stroke of luck but an act of God that my father caught hepatitis because it made my family cancel our tickets on the AirAsia flight.” She said, “We are extremely grateful, and God is really great. I believe that God is saving and protecting us, and this is truly a miracle."[[1]](#footnote-1) Another family that missed the airplane did not check their phone messages that the plane was going to leave at an earlier time. Christianawati said, “Maybe it is all God's plan that my family and I were not on the flight. It was a blessing in disguise."[[2]](#footnote-2) When the family heard that the plane that they were supposed to be on had gone down, they went to church to give thanks.

As I read that I thought of all of the families who had lost loved ones who were not going to the church to give thanks. I don’t believe in a God that sadistically, like a puppet master kills one and saves another. I don’t believe that God works like that. But I believe that God was grieving with those families and that God hurts with them. When I read things like that I feel like we have twisted religion. And we have misunderstood how God works. And I think about all of the pain that has been caused by religion. I think about the Crusades, the Inquisition, and religious wars. I think about how people have manipulated religion to oppress woman, defend slavery, and stifle scientific inquiry.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In Jesus’ day religion was manipulated to allow a man to divorce his wife for any reason. If dinner was burned, if the husband woke up on the wrong side of the bed, for any reason at all divorce was acceptable. And there was no alimony, no child support, no public assistance of any kind, the two options left were begging or prostitution. And Jesus rejected that understanding of religion. Jesus said “whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:9)[[4]](#footnote-4)

I reject any religion that claims God causes cancer, car wrecks or other catastrophes. It’s not God’s will that any child die of leukemia, or a teenager becomes paralyzed in a car wreck, or that 200,000 Haitians die in an earthquake. Just because something bad happens does not mean that God caused it to happen. Jesus understood that. We need to understand that.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I reject religion that claims good Christians don’t doubt. Faith is not about having absolute certainty, having all the answers, or seeing everything in black and white. Faith asks hard questions, faith struggles, faith doubts. And faith is about mystery and unanswered questions. Even Jesus experienced struggles and questions and doubts. When he was dying on the cross, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Doubt is not an enemy of faith, doubt is a part of faith.[[6]](#footnote-6)

I reject religion that says it’s okay for Christians to be judgmental and obnoxious. I reject religion that does not embrace Leelah Alcorn, transgender teen who committed suicide. I’m sure you’ve met Christians who are arrogant, self-righteous, and judgmental. There was a group of people like that in Jesus’ time. They believed they had all the right answers, and they condemned everyone who didn’t agree with them, including Jesus.[[7]](#footnote-7)

I want to share with you Jesus chastising the religious leaders of his day for their toxic faith, especially their arrogance, pride and hypocrisy. Jesus speaks some really harsh words because Jesus was unhappy with these people.

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Judgmental religion is the exact opposite of the grace filled spirit of Jesus Christ.

Many people in our world today, and in our own community, have problems with religion. But, they are really rejecting the way that God and Christianity and the church have been packaged. They need to know there are alternative expressions of the Christian faith, different from what we see in the news. They need to know not all Christians reject science and reason. They need to know not all Christians are judgmental and arrogant. They need to know that it is okay to have questions and doubts. They need to know that you can love God with your heart but also with your head.[[8]](#footnote-8)

I had an encounter with Jesus that helped me to experience grace, and hope, and love. And I have that encounter again when I remember my baptism, again when I see someone help another, again when I experience forgiveness. I was doing some spring cleaning over the holiday and I found a journal that I had written while I was in seminary. It was about a story that Dr. Sylvest had shared with our class. Dr. Sylvest died a few weeks ago, right before Christmas so this journal entry was so powerful for me to read and remember. Dr. Sylvest had just visited Medjugorje where he said he had an experience with the Holy Mother. Dr. Sylvest heard these words, “My beloved son, follow me and I will lead you home.”

I wrote in my journal in 1998, “Dr. Sylvest’s story about his vision of the Holy Mother gave me chills. I can imagine the same message that Dr. Sylvest heard conveyed to me. My beloved daughter, follow me and I will lead you home. I am blessed to be a child of God, to be watched over, cared for, and loved.”

In Medjugorje the Virgin Mary has appeared to six Herzegovian children since 1981. For several years the six visionaries reported seeing daily apparitions from the Virgin Mary and Medjugorje became crowded with pilgrims. Today three people still see visions of the Virgin Mary. One of the people, Vicka, says she has been given a prayer mission to pray for the sick. And for the last 21 years Vicka has met with pilgrims.[[9]](#footnote-9) Before her first encounter with the Virgin Mary at the age of 16, Vicka said she prayed from pure habit. She says, “Now I’ve turned completely to prayer. I commit my life completely to God. I feel sorry for those who do not believe in God, because Our Lady wants no one to be lost. We can help each other find the right way to God.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Over the next weeks we are going to be talking about finding the right way to God as we talk about how our beliefs help us answer life’s most profound questions: What matters most? Am I accepted? Where is God? What brings fulfillment? What about suffering? Is there hope? May we hear the words Dr. Sylvest heard, “My beloved son, follow me and I will lead you home.” “My beloved daughter, follow me and I will lead you home.”

1. http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/31/world/asia/airasia-missed-flight-fortunate-ones/index.html?hpt=hp\_t2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/31/world/asia/airasia-missed-flight-fortunate-ones/index.html?hpt=hp\_t2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://wjkbooks.typepad.com/files/thielen-leaders-guide-web-ready.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Much of this paragraph was taken from: http://wjkbooks.typepad.com/files/thielen-leaders-guide-web-ready.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Much of this paragraph was taken from: http://wjkbooks.typepad.com/files/thielen-leaders-guide-web-ready.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Much of this paragraph was taken from: http://wjkbooks.typepad.com/files/thielen-leaders-guide-web-ready.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Much of this paragraph was taken from: http://wjkbooks.typepad.com/files/thielen-leaders-guide-web-ready.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Much of this paragraph was taken from: http://wjkbooks.typepad.com/files/thielen-leaders-guide-web-ready.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our\_Lady\_of\_Medjugorje [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our\_Lady\_of\_Medjugorje [↑](#footnote-ref-10)