

The Apostle's Creed Part I: "I Believe in God"

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 17: 14-21

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If you are familiar with the story of Pentecost, then you know that the day the church was born was a day in which the apostles spoke in tongues. And you know that these were tongues which people from all over the world who were separated by different languages could understand as their own language. Well, since this is the story of the church's birth, we ought to know that understanding is what we are about as the church, and it is with that in mind that today I begin a series of five sermons on the Apostle's Creed, a creed that we say often in our worship here at Northminster, but a creed whose words you may have wondered about as perhaps you are not sure what you are saying.

And so as we begin today in this series of sermons, and what better place is there to begin than at the beginning? "I believe in God." One time I remember that I was listening to a rather well known theologian in the church take questions from a university audience about every conceivable topic in Christianity. He took questions about the Trinity, he took questions about miracles, you name it, he was asked about it. Finally, one young woman raised her hand and said, "Sir, do you believe in the devil?" I will never forget his answer.

"No" he said "I do not believe *in* the devil. I believe there is a devil, but I do not believe *in* the devil, I believe in God."

What did the man mean by saying he believes there is a devil but he doesn't believe *in* the devil. Believing *in* is different from believing that. If I say I believe *in* God, I am saying something different than if I merely say I believe *that* God exists. Now, certainly it would be strange of me to say I believe in God if I did not also say I believe that God exists. But to say that I believe *in*

God is to say something more than just I believe that there is a God, and today I want to point out three ways in which it is to say something more.

First, when I say I believe *in* God, or I believe in anything, it should be clear that what I am doing is expressing a favorable attitude toward what I say I believe in. If I say “I believe in the rule of law” you would expect to see me enthusiastically obeying the law and teaching my children to obey the law. You would expect to see me treating judges and police officers and legislators with respect. You would not expect to see me doing anything to undermine the rule of law. If I said I believe in the rule of law and you saw me trying to break people out of jail, you would doubt that I am serious when I say I believe in the rule of law. You would think I meant it as some kind of joke. And so, when I say “I believe in something” that tends to mean that I support it, I stand up and cheer for it, I work for it rather than against it. And that is why my theologian friend told the student “I don’t believe in the devil, I believe in God.” He doesn’t stand up and cheer for the devil, he stands up and cheers for God. And that is what we are saying when we say these words here at Northminster. We are not only saying that we believe there is a God. Anyone can say that. As the Epistle of James says “you believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder!” But to say I believe in God is to say something more. It is to say that we are willing to obey what that God commands, that we praise and worship this God, that we are for this God.

Second, to say “I believe in God” not only means that we have a favorable attitude toward God but it also means that we put our trust in this God. It doesn’t just mean you are willing to place a confident bet in God, it means you trust God completely. If someone says “I believe in my spouse” they aren’t just saying I think the odds are 4 to 1 that my spouse won’t betray

them. And by the way, I am not sure you'll see that in a Hallmark Card anytime soon. ("Honey, I believe in you and I think the odds are four to one that you won't betray me"). And neither are we saying that when we say "I believe in God". When we say we believe in God we are pledging our unconditional trust in God, our unconditional faith in God. In the gospel of Mark when Jesus called the fishermen Simon and Andrew to follow him it says "immediately they left their nets and followed him". When he also saw James and John, it then says "immediately he called them and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men." Mark says, in other words that when Jesus called these would be disciples there was no hesitation, there was complete trust. Now you may say, "I am willing to place my bets on God, and I think that's probably better than most people, but I don't have this unconditional faith you are talking about pastor, and I wouldn't even know how to go about getting it. How do you have unconditional faith in a God that you cannot see?" Well, in my opinion, you get it from God. It is a gift from God, it is not something you can do on your own. And what about me, the one speaking to you. Do I have that kind of faith? Well, it depends on when you ask me. Some days I do, and some days I don't. But I pray that one day I can have that kind of faith every day. I pray that all of us can have that faith one day. That kind of faith that doesn't hesitate, that doesn't waver, and that is the kind of faith that is meant when we say "I believe in".

Finally, the third thing I want to say about the words I believe in is that whenever any one of us can stand up and sincerely say I believe in God, this is something that we here at Northminster celebrate. And that is not something any of us would normally do when someone says I believe that. We don't celebrate when you say I believe that God exists. What difference does that make? But we celebrate whenever someone says I believe in God because we think

this belief changes their life, and it changes all of our lives. The New Testament describes the kind of faith that says I believe in as a new birth. Maybe in your own life at some time there was a certain point when something happened to you and the best way you can describe it is as a new birth because as you look back over your life, you say this is the event in my life which divides my life in half. And it doesn't have to be a religious event, it can be a time when you fell in love, maybe it was a time when you got married, maybe it was the time you discovered something you were passionate about that made you give up everything else for the sake of that one thing. Whatever it is, it is the kind of thing that makes you say "This event divides my life between everything that came before this event and everything that came after this event."

Well, the New Testament says it is like that whenever any of us discover the kind of faith that allows us to say "I believe in". And what is it that we do whenever there is a birth in our midst.

Well, as you know we get together and celebrate. Whenever we have the joyous occasion of announcing that one of you have had a new son or a new daughter, or a grandson or a granddaughter, or a great grandchild or even a great, great grandchild, this is something we rejoice in here at Northminster. And Jesus tells us there is rejoicing even in heaven when someone sincerely says I believe in God. Jesus says there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

I want to close with a story. As I said in my announcements, later today I am going to an ordination service for Brittany Hesson at Minerva Presbyterian Church. And that has brought to memory another ordination service that I took part in when I was living on Long Island in New York. This service took part in the middle of January and one thing you quickly learn when you visit Long Island is that there are a lot of very, very old Presbyterian Churches in that part of the

country. And this ordination service was taking part in a church dating back to the eighteenth century where things wouldn't always work very well, and here in the middle of January the furnace quit working. Well, the poor candidate who was waiting to be ordained wondered if he should postpone the service until they got the furnace fixed. Well, if you have ever been to an ordination service you also know that there are a lot of ministers at such services. And one of them said to the candidate, "Son, you're gonna have four Presbyterian preachers at this service. And with all the hot air coming out of their mouths, you don't have to worry about the furnace working." Well, I think the young man realized that was a joke, so he postponed the service anyway.

But I tell you that story because when someone says you are full of hot air, what they mean of course is that you say a lot of words but at the end of the day they don't really mean a whole lot. And you may wonder if a sermon about the difference between believing in and believing that is really just a lot of hot air. The word "in" after all is just a preposition, a single preposition, and what difference can a single preposition make? But if you are at all familiar with the bible, then you know that a single preposition can make all the difference in the world. When Jesus rebuked Simon Peter he said "Get behind me Satan!" What if he had said "Get within me, Satan!" or "Get beside me, Satan!" In the first chapter of the Gospel of John when Jesus is described it says "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him." What if it said "He was outside the world, and the world came into being alongside him." And in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis it tells us that God made human beings in his image. What if we were told he made humans against his image. A single preposition can make all the difference in the world, and so it is with believing in instead of believing that.

Next week, we will be in Part II of my series of sermons on the Apostle's Creed as I talk about what is meant by the words in this creed about God being the Father Almighty and the maker of heaven and earth. After that we will spend some time looking at what this creed says about Jesus, then I will talk about what the creed says about the judgment, then the holy catholic church and finally the communion of saints. For now, I hope you have come away from this first sermon with a better understanding of what we say when we say "I believe *in* God" and how it is different from only saying "I believe that God exists."