

Credo

From the series: In the Threshold of the Third Millennium

Text: Acts 17:27-28

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Epiphany IV, January 31, 1993

Transcription of the spoken sermon

“... so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For in God we live and move and have our being; as even some of your poets have said. For we too are God’s offspring.” Acts 17:27-28

“Credo.” That is a word that we have taken into our English language but it is really a Latin verb form from the Latin word *credari*, which means to trust or to put one’s faith in. And *credo*, the first person singular of the verb. In other languages other than English, oftentimes the form of the verb tells you the person and includes the pronoun. In this case *credo* means I believe. And this morning in the second of three messages on the edge of the third millennium, as we think together about our faith, about our community, and as we look to the future, I want us to move from last week and the whole question of our structure to the question of what we believe at this juncture in human history and at this point in our own lives.

I entitled the message “Credo,” which means literally I believe, because I want to lift up the fact that in a certain sense, this is a personal profession of faith on my part. Every sermon ought to be the preacher’s personal profession of faith. It ought to be the confession of the preacher’s faith. The preacher ought not to proclaim what he or she does not passionately believe. It happens sometimes. Among my many faults I think that has not been one. I think I can say without fear of contradiction in your midst that what I have all these many years preached is that which I passionately believe. I have not preached to you what I do not believe.

One can speak about what the Church teaches or what the Christian tradition is somewhat from a distance rather objectively without personal involvement or passion. One can speak of that. One can teach that way. But one cannot preach that way. At least, one ought not to preach that way. For to preach is to give

expression to a compassionate, compelling conviction in order to persuade, in order to convince, in order to move a people. And so, I say Credo this morning because I want to lift up the fact that *this* I believe. And perhaps more importantly, this I believe *passionately*.

But also because I want to say to you that you too ought to live with a passionate faith. And I want to raise the question: What do *you* believe - passionately? What do *you really* believe? What do you *really* believe? There is a difference between a nonchalant answer to a nonchalant question like that, and an answer that comes from really sitting back and saying, "What do I *really* believe?" Would you begin to tell me what the Church teaches? Would you begin to tell me what you learned in catechism? Would you begin to outline for me the Christian tradition as you have imbibed it? I would stop you at some point and I would say, "Now, come on. What do *you* believe?" In other words, what elicits from you passionate, compelling conviction? I have a suspicion that we live with a lot of rather foggy and vague ideas. And then something happens in our life and we are put on the spot or we have some critical juncture in our human experience and suddenly it becomes clear to us that "I believe this," or "I do not believe that" in spite of the fact that those elements may or may not have been a part of the kind of generalized, vague faith structure that we carry around with us.

I want to say this morning that I believe that Christ Community Church ought to be a place where faith is a matter of passion. Where we live out of a compelling conviction. Where it is more than - the Christian tradition holds . . . or the Church teaches . . . or the Bible says.... I would that we would be a community of people that were moved by passionate faith, where things were clear and were articulated in our experience, were things for which we are willing to live, and if need be, things for which we would be willing to die. *Credo*. What do you really believe? What would you write down in a paragraph of twenty-five or fifty words entitled "These Things I Believe"?

Paul was a passionate believer - a person of passionate conviction. In the scripture lesson this morning Paul comes to Athens. I envy him that. In September I am going to take some folks to Athens, and we will be able to appreciate the grandeur of the ancient city, but only from the ruins of the present. It must have been some experience to come to Athens in the first century. Oh, to be sure, the Golden Age was five hundred years earlier, but Athens continued to be a great center, a great city, the university city of the western world, to be sure, where all of the great thoughts that have ever been thought were thought and discussed. Paul came there in the midst of his missionary journey and, while he was waiting for his companions to join him, he signed up for a city tour.

I want to say, I would like us to be passionate believers like Paul, but I would hope that we might be able to be a bit more appreciative of human culture than Paul because after his city tour, Luke tells us that he was disgusted. He was disgusted because he saw all of the temples, and all of the idols, and apparently

he had this overwhelming sense of a spiritual quest that was coated over with darkness and it disturbed him. I don't want to be too hard on Paul, for he was a man of compelling conviction with great passion, who was turning the world upside down because he was so convinced that the one true and eternal God had acted decisively in the event of Jesus Christ; that this was a cosmic event and so he went everywhere telling the Gospel. Thus, when he encountered Athens with its layers of religion representing humankind's vague religious quest, it upset him. And I want to honor that. But I do also want to lift up a danger when our religious conviction can sometimes become so focused and so frantic and so fanatic that we miss the larger picture. I would have wished that Paul might at least have given us a line of appreciation for the wonder and marvels of Athens. There has never been a greater cultural explosion and expression of the human spirit than Athens. I wish he could have been more open to appreciating the goodness of that. But, I go astray a bit.

Let me return to the story. Before long the citizens of Athens heard that Paul, the passionate missionary, was in town and they brought him right to the very supreme court, as it were, to give witness to his faith. He did so rather smartly I believe, connecting with his audience, making reference to the statue of the unknown God, and then saying, "I know that God. And that God I proclaim to you." He moved to the broad canvas of creation, "This one who has created all things...." And then he narrowed down, finally focusing on Jesus and the resurrection and the coming accountability of all before the face of God through Jesus Christ. Paul was a passionate believer who with all of his heart believed that the one true and eternal God who spoke and brought all things into being had come to be manifest in this one Jesus Christ, and Jesus in his way and in his life was vindicated in his death and resurrection, and the end was near. And because Paul believed that the end of the world was near, he called all to account after the proclamation of this good news of what God had done in Jesus Christ. Not a bad sermon really. Not a bad technique of preaching. And with all the passion that was his person, he presented the resurrected Christ as the window into God before whom all peoples would be brought to account.

That was nearly 2000 years ago. And now we stand on the edge of the Third Millennium. What do you really believe about the things of which Paul spoke? Is it now enough for us to continue to say the things that Paul said, or do we somehow or other have to take stock of a perspective of 2000 years, which separates us? All that separated Paul from the event of Jesus Christ was a couple of decades, and yet there *were* a couple of decades there. Paul had no personal first-hand experience of the events of Jesus. He experienced Jesus, he says, by revelation. And he experienced it also by discussion with the other apostles. But Paul's primary conviction came out of that mystical experience when he was thrown on his face on the Damascus road - the encounter with the ascended Lord.

Now for us, do we, as we approach the Third Millennium, do we simply continue to reiterate what Paul said, or must we judge what Paul said in the light of Paul's

background that brought him to that point? And do we reiterate the 2000 years of Christian church doctrine that has come in the meantime? What I mean to say is, from Paul, primarily, stems Christian theology.

One of the things that I shared with you last fall that has gotten as much response as anything I have ever said as I was going out to Brandeis University for a discussion with Protestants, Catholics and Jews. I suggested to you that there have been a series of forks in the road along the line and that really it would not have been necessary for Christianity to develop separately from Judaism. It would not have been necessary for Islam to develop separately from Judaism and Christianity, and it would not have been necessary for the Christian Church to be divided into Orthodoxy and the West, and then the West into the Catholic tradition and the Protestant tradition. Those forks in the road need not have happened. There was no compelling truth that necessitated those splits. Those splits happened through human foggy, though human misunderstanding, through human stubbornness and blindness, through human pride and arrogance. Somehow or other, when I said that, it seemed to ring a bell with a number of you.

And now I am wondering, on the edge of the Third Millennium, whether or not we must not look at Paul and what happened in his formulation of the faith and, in dialogue with that, find our own way to bring to expression what is happening in our world today, in order to make an impact on our world for the one true and eternal God who was revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul, after all, thought he was at the end of the age! Paul had absolutely no sense at all that 2000 years later we would be here. Remember that Paul was jerked by God out of his tradition, uprooted as it were, turned upside down. Paul, so steeped in the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and then so convicted by Jesus Christ that he was able to be absolutely uprooted from his Jewishness. Yet he need not have thrown over the faith of his forbearers, for he says that the Jew had every advantage. He never said that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was not the true God or that Israel did not have true faith. He was simply trying to say to his Israel, "Look, the promised one is here." But I wonder whether or not 2000 years later we don't have to seriously consider what our message has to be for the Third Millennium.

I read a very interesting book recently entitled, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, which was a study of the years 1922 to 1936 in the Presbyterian Church. That is the period of denominational crisis out of which arose Fundamentalism. It was a time where five fundamental doctrines were annunciated as absolutely essential for orthodox Christian faith. There was a deep division within the church as to how those events were to be understood and interpreted. In that book there is a statement by Henry Adams in his autobiography, published in 1918. He spoke about his birth, I suppose, in the year 1854, and he said, "A school boy in 1854 stood closer to the year one than to the year 1900." Follow me? In 1854 years there was more continuity, more similarity, less challenge or disruptions to assumed understanding of reality than happened in the next forty-six years. And

that was written at the beginning of the 20th century. What would he say if he stood now another 140 years later with the dramatic, radical, revolutionary developments in human understanding, our knowledge of the physical universe and our sense of the development of history?

I think sometimes that those of us in the conservative Christian tradition have had to live a schizophrenic existence. We are modern people out there every day of the week. We live with business and industry and the exploding knowledge in all the professions. We operate with computer chips and we live in a world where we have landed a person on the moon and have a space vessel going out toward Mars, and all the other amazing things that are a part of this human scene of ours, and then we come into church and it is like another world and another age. It is hard to weave, between the religious realm and that secular realm, a relationship and a dialogue, a connection and an interlacing between their two realities.

At the beginning of this century there was a great Christian optimism. We were going to evangelize the world in this generation: That's what they said in 1910 at a great missionary conference. But it's not happening is it? Do you foresee the time when the world will become Christian? Frankly, I don't. Do you foresee the possibility that all of those world religions with their centuries of development and tradition will somehow or other be brought into the Christian Church? Do you really believe that? I'll confess to you, I don't really believe that. What then? What then must be our credo as we enter the third millennium?

I wonder if God, through the processes of history, as God's Spirit moves in the development of human experience, is bringing us at the edge of the third millennium and saying, "The thing you've got to do is, out of your experience of Israel and out of your experience of Jesus Christ and out of your Christian tradition, you've got to enter into dialogue with the richness of Judaism and the richness of Islam, and the richness of Buddhism and Hinduism. You've got to begin to talk about that insatiable religious quest in the human heart that is universal and forget the imperialism that would seek to bring everyone into the Christian Church and begin rather to share your knowledge and faith and trust in the God made available in Jesus. Bring that to the table. Our intention must be, in the decades ahead, it seems to me, not to bring everybody to Christian faith, but to bring the world to trust in the God whom Jesus revealed. Not the institutional imperialism and triumphalism that would make the whole world Christian, but rather in Jesus' name to bring the world to the kind of human community that Jesus lived out.

It's really an exciting day in the Church. On the edge of the third millennium I want to invite you to join me into a continuing pilgrimage, probing the faith in order to understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches today. It is a day in which exciting things are happening. I brought some books with me this morning that I thought it might be fun for you to see. After all, I am at the threshold too, of

going on vacation, so I have begun to gather (retrieves books from pulpit) - take a look at this! For one thing, I am wondering if we don't have to get back behind Paul and this is one of three or four recent publications - *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 500 pages long It happens to be written by a Catholic. There are three or four others. Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions, Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism*, 460 pages. Hans Küng, *Judaism Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 750 pages. And then this one: *The Birth of the Modern, World Society 1815 to 1830*. Fifteen years, 1100 pages. And you thought *I* was wordy!

Now, dear friends, I just say to you that there is so much that is happening in the world of scholarship, in the Church and outside of the Church, which is trying to come to terms with modernity and an ancient faith. My calling as a theologian in the traditional understanding of that calling is simply to explicate what is given, and not to think beyond it. That is orthodoxy's definition of paradigm theology. It is my conviction that such orthodoxy is idolatry. It is the great tool of those in power in the institutions to keep the institutions intact. "Don't bother me with the fact, my mind's made up."

But we cannot afford, on the edge of the third millennium, simply to continue to reiterate yesterday's answers to yesterday's questions. That's fundamentalism - repeating an answer that at one time throbbed with passion because it connected with life. It is our task to believe passionately, engaged with our contemporary experience and the experience of our world, and there is nothing in the experience of the contemporary world that need frighten us or threaten us. Paul's message was still a relevant message, pointing to the one true and eternal God, the creator of all things, whose face we see, whose heart we see in the face of Jesus.

The way of Jesus is a way of justice, and righteousness and peace. It is a way full of love, full of grace, working on behalf of others and our world in terms of Jesus' mind and heart. Working toward the healing of persons and the humanization of society. I'll tell you, that's what I really believe. I believe it passionately. And to the extent that you are willing to join me, we are going to open a whole new page with a daring attempt to confess what we really believe in order that we might really make a difference in faithfulness to the God who is always before us - beckoning us on. The God who, when we have discovered the final secret of the universe, will still be more. The God who gives us confidence and a foundation for a sure hope. The God who keeps the world from disintegrating and unraveling. The God who allows hope to arise in our hearts and healing to happen, who calls us to the full expression of our humanity and the humanness of our world. Ah, it is an exciting task!

What do *you* really believe? What do you *really* believe?