

Credo: Personal and Community

Deuteronomy 4:4-9, Ephesians 4:1-6

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

My sermon title this morning is "Credo: Personal and Community." *Credo* is the Latin first person singular form, translated "I believe." Obviously that is a personal expression, and yet I think when the community is thought of as community, it might also be legitimate to say, "We believe," in that same sense. Finally it comes down to that. I believe. You believe. And then there are some things that we share together that we believe together. Sometimes people will say to me, "We don't believe that, do we?" Or, "What do we believe about..." and I have to say, "We don't believe anything." But, I understand the question, because there is a sense in which a community is marked by a certain spirit, a certain posture. This morning I want to say to you once again in just another way what has been said here many times - I believe, you believe, and while we share many things in common, it finally comes down to that personal conviction of faith, a faith not simply an assent to a number of propositions or creedal statements, but rather, that fundamental trust, that fundamental trust of our lives, and that's a highly individual exercise. Nobody can do that for you. You cannot abdicate the responsibility to anyone else, church community, church official.

There were a couple of items that came into my hand as I was contemplating my fall preaching and those two items determined the sermon for this morning. One was a review article in *The Christian Century* about six weeks ago by a theologian named William Placher who was reviewing the newly published four-volume set by Jaroslav Pelikan, the eminent church historian. Pelikan published this in cooperation with Valerie Hotchkiss just before his 80th year. Not too bad at this point to be publishing a four-volume work of 3,796 pages. The first volume is entitled *Credo*. 606 pages and you can buy it independently for a little under \$40. But, if you want the four volumes with the CD Rom, it costs \$995. Now, can you believe anybody would invest that much money in four volumes that contain 2000 years of creeds and confessional statements? That's what Pelikan has done. Two thousand years, right up to the year 2000, of creeds and confessional statements from around the globe from every conceivable kind of community and denomination and confessional family. Four volumes, almost 4000 pages. That could take care of your leisure time for a while.

Pelikan has written much. I have an earlier five-volume set on the Christian tradition in which he traces the theological development over 2000 years. I have quoted Pelikan here, a good Lutheran theologian. He's the one who said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." An excellent scholar, he has put all of this together and toward the end of his life recognizes that what he has just engaged in is an archival exercise.

As Pelikan observes, many in this age feel

"that even if the time for faith as such may not have passed, the time for teaching Christian faith as authoritative dogma probably has, and the time for confessing it in a normative creedal formulary certainly has."

Placher, *Christian Century*. September 20, 2003.

What he is saying is what I have given my whole life to and what I offer in this final offering is an exercise in creating an archive for the future. Now, he doesn't mean, I'm sure, that the church is done thinking theologically or that the church is done expressing itself confessionally. What he's trying to say is that we have moved beyond the era of dogmatic authoritarian religious prescription. The time of formulating dogmatic statements and absolute creeds is over. We can go into the reasons for that. Fundamentally, it is because we have begun, over the last one hundred years, to think historically. We have seen how all of this has developed, and we have come to see not the absolute character of these statements, but rather, their relative character. We have come to see how all of this has evolved, and so we are less ready in this time to give absolute allegiance to some kind of formulation. We know that we are people on the way, and we know that being religious is not having some externally imposed, authoritarian statement of truth placed on us, but rather, in being engaged in seeking to find our human experience illuminated by our religious observance and practice. I think that Pelikan is absolutely right. The day of the authoritarian church, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, canon and creed, is past or is passing. I might be wrong about it, but I don't think so, and I surely hope not.

The second item that came into my hands about this time was the book I had with me last week, Elaine Pagels' *Beyond Belief*. It is an excellent study, a very personal one. As I mentioned last week, Elaine Pagels gave up the church in her adolescence because of its absolute exclusivism. She was turned off by that. But, she still became a religious scholar, and she began her doctoral work about the time that a library was found in the sands of the Egyptian desert in 1945, the Nag Hammadi Library. A huge clay pot was found that had some fifty manuscripts in it.

In the 4th century, when Athanasius was finally established on the Bishop's throne in Alexandria, they were in the process of determining what was to be the canon. Athanasius is the church father who first mentions the 27 books of the New Testament. Athanasius was a tenacious, ferocious kind of leader. He passed

an edict that all other writings that didn't make the cut of the canon should be banned and burned, and probably some monk who didn't like that kind of an attitude gathered some of the most valuable manuscripts, put them in this clay pot and buried them in the Egyptian sand where they stayed for 1600 years.

Elaine Pagels at the time of her doctoral work, as these documents were becoming available, did an excellent study which still is looked to today on the gnostic gospels. As she did that kind of study, she learned all about those early centuries and the formation of the Christian church as an ecclesiastical institution and the theological tradition that formed and shaped that church in those early centuries. She had left the church, but she does this religious scholarship and studies particularly that period of the church that was developing orthodoxy. Orthodox means straight thinking. She was well aware of that period of three or four centuries during which this diverse Jesus movement was being brought under control, reined in and given a normative form.

Then, as I mentioned last week, she has personal tragedy in her life and one Sunday morning while out jogging in New York City, to warm herself, slips into the narthex of a church and finds herself deeply moved by the music and the prayers and the liturgy. She goes back, she goes to the lower level of the church and gets into a support group and finds her life being nurtured by the religious observance from which she had absented herself for many years. Just as Pelikan sees no future for that dogmatic structure of Christian faith, so Elaine Pagels, who has studied the whole formation of that structure, while returning to community, to religious, specifically Christian, community, is not willing to return to that authoritarian, dogmatic, ecclesiastical structure, for she says, "While I learned again the things that I loved in the Christian tradition, I also learned the things that I cannot love." Part of what she cannot love is documented in that insert in your liturgy which I included from her book. I'm not going to read that, but in that little section she tells about the church father Irenaeus, who was a Bishop in the second century in the area of Gaul. Irenaeus, as a leader in the church, experienced people all over the place. He experienced all kinds of people who were having visions and revelations, who had their own intuitions, and their own insights and their own wisdom and they were all giving expression to it, and in a word, that Jesus movement, that early Christian church, was chaos. It was messy. There was no uniformity of expression of faith, and there was no uniformity of practice and observance.

So, Irenaeus was one of the chief shapers of a movement that brought a normative structure to the Christian movement. Athanasius, I mentioned a moment ago, was another one. There were a number of such people. Finally, that Christian movement was brought into a uniform expression when the church was made legitimate by the Emperor Constantine. We speak about the Constantinian establishment of the church. All of that diverse expression was brought into an acceptable expression which was orthodox opinion. In the little insert I gave you, you can find how nasty that process can become because what happens

immediately when you establish what is "in," is that you also rule out what is "out" and the process begins, the process of excluding and exclusivism and of a triumphalism that claims to have the very truth of God and damns that which differs from it. It is a normal process, it is a human process, we can understand how it happened, we can understand that these leaders were good people who sincerely believed they were doing the will of God.

Elaine Pagels is sympathetic to these leaders, but as she indicates and as we religious leaders don't like to admit, if indeed we claim for your benefit that we have the truth of God, and if we believe that we are the guardians of that truth, and if we believe that for the honor of God and for the well-being of the church we have the obligation to hold to that authoritatively, then we can do that with all humility. Who am I but a servant of God? Except the servant has honor in proportion to the one he serves, and so if God has invested me with this deposit of faith, then some of the authority of God comes to me, too.

As Elaine Pagels says, the process in those second, third, fourth centuries was to create a canon and a creed and an ecclesiastical hierarchy, and I'll tell you what, I was born too late. I wish I'd been born when there was a canon and a creed and authoritarian hierarchy. (I would like to have been a Cardinal, if not the Pope.) What a way to go! If you have the canon, and you have the creedal formulation, and the power to enforce it, you are golden! What I'm talking about is actually what happened very normally, very understandably in the process of the emergence of the Christian church into a dominant institution.

Elaine Pagels says, "I can't go back there. I've come to see that I really need religious community. I've come to see there's a great treasure there that still touches me inside and I want to expose myself to it. But, I can't go back to those things that I cannot love, an authoritarian, dominating dimension marked by canon, creed and absolute, ecclesiastical hierarchy."

I wonder about the future of the church. Pope John Paul II just celebrated 25 years and we're going to be seeing a lot out of Rome in these next weeks and months, maybe years, who knows? We know his failing health. Obviously, there were conversations in Rome. But, what a marvelous system. He has appointed all of the Cardinals that will appoint his successor, so the deck is stacked. How can he lose? But, isn't it amazing that that dogmatic structure can continue to perpetuate itself in our world today, our world of satellite and internet and four volumes of two thousand years of creeds and confessions? I wonder how long even the Roman Catholic Church can resist the democratizing spirit that undercuts authoritarianism?

I think about a church sort of in-between, the Episcopal Church right now trying to keep from breaking communion. It's a grand tradition, again, but should the leaders of the American Church who believe that they have acted with integrity and honesty and in accord with the will of God as they understand it in the determination to consecrate a gay man to the office of Bishop, should they back

down in order that the body of Christ not be rent? What is the future going to hold for grand ecclesiastical institutions? I don't know. But, I know this - and that's why I talk about it this morning because I want you to be very self-conscious about it - I know this, I am so delighted to be a part of a community, a religious community, a community committed to the religious quest, a community Christian in that it finds its access to God in the face of Jesus, the God of Israel whose creed was, "The Lord our God is one God."

The Jew Paul saying that that one God for him was now seen through the lens of Jesus, his Jewish brother. It was Paul who pleads with the Ephesian community to be patient with one another and deal with one another in gentleness and to bear one another in love, and to keep the spirit of unity and the bond of peace. Now, Paul was passionate. He was so passionate about it because he did believe he had that apostolic mission, and yet in his better moments, he spoke to the community and those were all separate communities at that time, to be gentle and patient, forbearing one another and to keep that bond of peace and love.

I am so happy to be a part of a community like this which is weak and vulnerable, that in the face of the world is powerless. The best way for a religious community to be is to be powerless and vulnerable so that we give attention to the things that are really those things to which we ought to be attending, and that is the illumination of our human experience before the face of that mystery, because finally, it is not some grand ecclesiastical institution or some absolute creed or some carefully defined canon apart from which there can be no other light, but it is *credo*, it is "*I believe*," and by extension, "*We believe*." A congregation that blesses diversity and encourages conversation, walking together. We're not isolated, atomistic, fragmented folks. We're in community and we converse and we care, we support. But, we don't have all that baggage beyond us. Nor do we have some authoritarian system imposed upon us. We can "roll our own" and do it together. I'm so delighted to be a part of a place like this, and I'm so proud that we have come this way together. It's not for everybody and we certainly have not arrived, but we've positioned ourselves to capture the future. Not everybody's happy about that.

A couple weeks ago Don was accosted in the hardware store in Graafschap for affiliating with a place like this that doesn't believe anything. And this week we got an e-mail, it came to Barbara; must be that the Center for Religion and Life mailing that stirred this up. The subject is the truth. It's from Steve:

I want to encourage your organization and Christ Community Church to abandon the liberal, non-biblical perspectives you are putting forth. You are misleading many people who are new believers or not mature in their faith with lies from the pit of hell. I pray that you will preach the gospel of Jesus Christ alone, not your gospel, and teach the Bible as the true and complete revelation of God to man. This will change lives and bring people into God's kingdom rather than waste time on the useless discussions you

seem to promote. Thank you for your consideration. May God bless you and return you to the truth.

Well, thanks, Steve, but no thanks. I've been there. I know about that experience of authoritarian domination and authoritarian absolutism and narrow exclusivism, and I don't ever want to be a part of it again, because you spoil me. You're wonderful. And together we live before the face of God with confidence, with joy, and it's so good.

References:

Elaine Pagels. *Beyond Belief*, 2003.

William Placher. (Review of Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vols. 1-4. University of Chicago, 1984.) *Christian Century*, 2003.