

August 23, 2015

Philippians 2:1-11 Weirid Things Presbyterians Do: #3 **We Make a Statement of Faith**

One of the first times I had to think about what I really believed was when I went to college. It was a Lutheran school and those Lutherans, they were different. In our college worship, they sang a lot. They had communion a lot. And they talked a lot about Martin Luther and sola scriptura and justification by grace and lots of other Lutheran things. I was one of about 8 Presbyterians at that school (no joke). And regularly people would ask, “so what do Presbyterians believe any way?” All of a sudden I had to know what I believed. It was something that some would say I should have known. I mean, I grew up in the church. I went through confirmation. But until I had to explain what I believed, I really didn't have any idea.

Maybe you have had an experience like that-- when you had to explain what you believed. And you had to answer the questions of faith for yourself: Who is God? And what is God like? And why do I put my faith in a God like that? Maybe it was hard to answer those questions. Maybe

it was a little scary or a bit stressful. Maybe in spite of that, it was a gift to think more deeply about God and what it means for your life.

Maybe you have had an experience like that, when you had to answer the questions, why God and why this God? The church itself, in its long, long history, has had many experiences like that. When it had to put its faith into words: THIS is what we believe, not that. THIS God is the God we trust, not that one. As questions and challenges came up, it's how the church responded. And those moments, were God's gift to us.

The church's creeds and statements of faith give us comfort and consolation. For us to repeat them, is an act of worship and a spiritual discipline. This is our God, we say, and this is why. So every Sunday, as strange as it may seem, we say what we believe. And that's #3 in the list of Weird Things that Presbyterians do: We make a Statement of Faith.

Now a statement of faith is not something unique to Presbyterians. Most other churches have a creed or affirmation of belief, and many of them say them every Sunday. But Presbyterians ARE unique in that we don't have one official statement of faith. We have a whole Book of them. It's called the Book of Confessions. Currently it contains 11 statements of

faith. There's the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, The Scot's Confession, the Heidelberg Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Shorter and Longer Catechisms, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967 and the 1983 Brief Statement of Faith. Presbyterians have chosen to collect and keep all of these statements of faith because each of them has something to say about God and our faith. They are important to us, and not just for their theology. But also for their humanity, their history and culture from which they came, and we Presbyterians love, love, love learning about that. Look, we say, here is the church bravely being the church in its day and age. The Spirit of God that is with us is always with us!

So every Sunday, we repeat one of those statements. We do it after the sermon, after the Word of God has inspired us again to be followers of Jesus. Usually, we say the Apostles' Creed. I admit that that is because I am kind of lazy. The Apostles Creed, bless its heart, is the shortest statement of faith in our Book. And most Christians know it or have it memorized. So it's easy; and it gets to the point about who this God is that we worship and serve. And making that statement is important. It's

important to us for three reasons: One, it helps the church know what it believes. Two, it teaches us what we believe. And three, it tells the world what we believe.

First, a statement of faith helps the church know what it believes. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, when the early church began to get organized, it needed a unified understanding of the God they had experienced in Jesus Christ. There were lots of versions of Christianity back then. So when the Christian Emperor Constantine came to power in 325 CE he set about creating one church with one authorized set of beliefs. He gathered bishops and theologians from all over and told them to agree on what they believed. The result was the Nicene Creed. Now to us it may not look like much, but this statement of faith took decades to agree on. And my guess is that sometimes it takes us that long to figure things out. This creed established the pillars of our faith. That God was the Creator of all things, not just some things. That Jesus was not a little bit God as some claimed or a little bit human as others claimed. Jesus was fully God and fully human. He really was. And he really died and he really rose again. And that the Holy Spirit who was also really God and really

making the church be the church in the world. You will notice that there's not much about us or the role of human beings in all this. That's because the Church Fathers and Mothers wanted to get their facts straight about God first. In their world of many gods, they had to distinguish their God. This God was not like the others. This God was not a god of war, or a god of fertility, or a god seeking power and glory. This God was like Jesus. Who did not come for the sake of power or for the sake of fertility or for the sake of war. But for our sake. To die for us and rise for us, to give us new life in the world to come.

A statement of faith helps the church know what it believes. And second, a statement of faith teaches us what we believe. It educates us. A friend of mine once memorized the Westminster Shorter Catechism. 107 questions and answers about Presbyterian beliefs. Ok, she did it for a contest and there was a scholarship involved. I teased her about how boring it probably was but she surprised me. She said, "Mary, there was a lot of good stuff in there for something that came from the 1640s. Did you know that it was written in England in the middle of a war between

the Anglicans and the Presbyterians and Oliver Cromwell?” It kind of made me want to read it.

And that’s why it’s in our Book of Confessions. To teach us about how the church was the church and how God was God even then. There are three catechisms in our Book of Confessions specifically made for teaching. And I like to think that we don’t have them just to repeat back what they say. We Presbyterians like to engage our brains and the brains of others. A statement of faith is not a kind of test for us, to make sure you believe in the virgin birth and the resurrection of the body and that Jesus spent three days in hell. A statement of faith gives us a shape, a framework for knowing God. There are a few common frameworks or shapes in our confessions. One is triangular. God is a Trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Our god is the God who made us, and redeemed us, and sustains us today. Always in relationship with each other; always in relationship with us. Another interesting shape comes from a statement of faith that’s not in our Book of Confessions, but in the Bible. In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we have a statement of faith that looks like a U-shape. It begins with Jesus fully divine, fully present with God in the

heavenly realms. He empties himself, becoming human. He lowers himself further, being obedient to God to the point of death. And even further, it is the death of a criminal on a cross. Jesus is present in the lowest depths of our humanity. But God exalts him, raising him from the dead, raising him above all heaven and earth. And as Jesus let go of himself, as Jesus surrendered himself to God's way, so we do the same, Paul says to the Philippians. Get off your high horse. Stop being so high maintenance. The way of Jesus is our way. When you are asked to serve or to have mercy on another. When there is a dirty job to do or an unsavory person to love. Remember the shape of Christ's life.

Remember that this is what you believe.

A statement of faith teaches us what we believe. It helps the church know what it believes. And third, it tells the world what we believe. Not included in our book of Confessions, is the very first Christian statement of faith. It was just two words. Kurios Iesus. Jesus is Lord. It's such a small and simple statement of faith to us, but to the first-century Christians, it was a dangerous statement. In their time and in their culture, the Roman Emperor, Caesar, was Lord. HIS title was Kurios: He

was Master, Lord, Emperor, God. His subjects were to put their faith in HIM. They were to believe in HIS power to give life and to take it. And for someone to say that there was another Lord, that was treason. For those early Christians, it was a statement of resistance to say Jesus is Lord. It was opposition to the Roman world that was so wrapped up in the politics of power and money. The ethics of eat or be eaten. Of might makes right. The ethics of a self-serving empire seeking its own good and its own glory. Caesar is Lord. No, the Christians whispered, Jesus is Lord. Kurios Iesus.

Many of our statements of faith were made during times of challenge and conflict. When Christians took a stand against the empires of this world. One of the most amazing ones is the Theological Declaration of Barmen. It was written in 1934 by German Christians who were horrified by Adolf Hitler's rise to power. Hitler had become popular with his promises to fix the economy and all of its unemployment. And he played on people's fears and prejudices. Blaming Jews and Gypsies and immigrants, making them scapegoats for their country's problems. He outlawed political parties and labor unions. He got rid of university

professors who opposed him. And he got church leaders to support his actions. He made it seem like being a good, faithful Christian meant being a good, racist, militaristic German. Many of the German Christians were terrified and they were manipulated into saying that Hitler's rule was God's will. But some in the churches resisted. They made a statement about what they believed, that the church was not Hitler's church. And God's will was not Hitler's will. And no matter what happened, it was Jesus Christ who was Lord of their lives, not Hitler.

A statement of faith tells the world what we believe. Jesus is Lord. Not the government or the state. Or the fractured culture. Or the will of a fragile humanity. In times of challenge and trouble, the church takes a stand. The Confession of 1967 was written during the unrest of the 60s, with the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War on their hearts, Presbyterians affirmed that God was a God of peace and reconciliation. The 1983 Confession which we read today, was written when the southern and northern Presbyterian churches united. Our mission, they said, is still the mission of God. To free us and all of creation from the

power of sin and death. In times of conflict and anxiety, we are called to say what we believe. In THIS time of challenge and conflict what statement of faith can we make? With what we say and do, what does it mean for Jesus Christ to be Lord? A challenge to our faith can be a gift that draws us closer to the God who love us. How might God be doing that with you? I invite you during the week, using these confessions if you like, to reflect on what you believe and make your own statement of faith.

Because a statement of faith is a powerful thing. It is a comfort and a consolation. It is an act of worship and a spiritual discipline. This is what we believe, we say. This is our God who made us and redeemed us and sustains us through every moment of life. Glory be to our Creator, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.