

“Praise the Mount – Matthew 16:13-19

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The themes for this Lenten series each week come are crystallized in the hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” Each week we focus on stories of Peter in the gospels with a phrase from that hymn that focuses us on a specific aspect of Peter’s faith and, in turn, our faith.

This week, the phrase is “Praise the mount.” More specifically, the phrase from the hymn is “Praise the mount, I’m fixed upon it. Mount of God’s unchanging love.” God’s unchanging love is found in Jesus Christ.

That’s a core conviction of our faith.

When it comes to our faith and what we believe, the worst thing that can happen is to be told there are a certain set of parameters one must adhere to in order to qualify as one of the faithful. To come to certain conclusions on one’s own is best, but to be told by someone else that a certain set of beliefs must be adhered to without any questioning of them is arguably not a Christian thing and is certainly not a Presbyterian tenet.

In fact, there are many who get turned off by a litany of supposed beliefs one is told he or she must adhere to possess a faith that is acceptable to God.

Martin Thielen is an author and pastor of a large United Methodist church, and he tells the story about how he came up with a title for a sermon series at his church based on a conversation he once had with a man named Danny. When he first met Danny, Danny said, “Preacher, you need to know that I’m an atheist. I don’t believe in the Bible. I don’t like organized religion. And I can’t stand self-righteous, judgmental Christians.”

In spite of Danny’s avowed atheism and Thielen’s devout Christian beliefs, they became close friends and shared many conversations about faith. One day, Danny announced with a laugh,

“I’ve decided to upgrade from being an atheist to being an agnostic.” Several months later he said, “I’ve had an epiphany. I realize that I don’t reject Christianity. Instead, I reject the way that intolerant Christians package Christianity.” A few weeks after that conversation, Danny said, “Martin, you’ve just about convinced me on this religion stuff. So I want to know — what’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?”

That question became the title of that sermon series and, eventually, a book. “What’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?”

In the book, Thielen lists several concepts that Christians don’t need to believe in. Thielen says we don’t need to believe that God causes cancer, car wrecks and other catastrophes. (Although God can and does bring good results out of tragedy, God does not cause tragic events to occur.) We don’t need to believe that good Christians don’t doubt. (Doubt is not the enemy of faith but part of authentic Christianity.) We don’t need to believe that Christians can’t believe in evolution. (Science and faith are fully compatible, and theistic evolution is a perfectly acceptable Christian belief.)

Thielen also says we don’t need to believe that women can’t be preachers and women must submit themselves to men, or that God cares about saving souls but not about saving the planet, or that bad people will be “left behind” and subject to the darkness of hell. (Left-behind rapture theology is neither a biblical nor a historical Christian belief and should be left behind by mainline and moderate evangelical Christians.)

We don’t need to believe that Jews won’t make it into heaven or that everything in the Bible should be taken literally or that God loves straight people but not gay people or that it’s okay for Christians to be judgmental and obnoxious. (True Christians leave judgment to God.)

No, Martin Thielen says, to be a Christian we don’t need to believe all those things. There is really just one belief we should subscribe to. To be a Christian, we believe or should be on the road

to believing in Jesus—his life, his teachings, his example, his death and resurrection, his great love for us—mount of God’s unchanging love.

That’s it. All we do as Christians comes out of that singular belief. It’s not always easy to make sense of who Jesus is and all that he did. But to be a Christian means to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, our savior, the Messiah.

Here in Matthew 16, Jesus asked his disciples one day, “Who do you say that I am?” He had heard how others thought he might be John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or another prophet. No, “who do you say I am?” he asked them.

And Peter says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus had to have been pleased; maybe he was jumping up and down. “Peter, you got it! And you don’t believe this just because somebody told you,” Jesus exclaims. “You believe this because your heavenly father has told you.”

That didn’t mean that Peter never doubted again. It doesn’t mean that he didn’t wander from his faith at times (such as when he denied Jesus when it mattered most). He came up short numerous times after this. But because of what was in his heart, instilled by God, he was able to profess in the presence of Christ that Jesus was messiah.

That’s really all God is looking for from us—a belief that in Christ we have been reconciled and that in him we have a source of life—transforming life in this world and eternal life in the world to come. That’s our conviction.

That simple equation would hopefully be a welcoming invitation to all skeptics who don’t often want to buy into all the extraneous mandates so many churches put forth as required for inclusion.

There’s just one belief we should all be focused on: calling Christ Lord, the source of God’s unchanging love.

When we subscribe to this belief, however, the weight of it should transform us. Calling Christ Lord is not just words we utter, but a reflection in the lives we lead. They are lives of discipleship.

Jesus told Peter after his confession, “Upon you I will build my church.” And Christ is building his church upon all of us who live our lives as reflections of our conviction that Jesus is Lord.

Even though there is just one belief we are called to subscribe to, there are multiple ways in which our faith is played out—multiple ways in which we respond to this amazing love. We can be disciples in so many settings and styles and personalities. This is the beauty of the diversity of the body of Christ.

We can be Jesus’ most outward cheerleaders—telling anybody who’ll listen how excited we are to be God’s children.

We can also be as devoted but quieter—serving through our actions as much as our words.

Emlyn Ott, an author and professor, wrote of her experience walking with a friend of hers through the last stages of her life as she battled a fatal disease. Because of her lone belief in Jesus as Lord and her willingness to carry that belief out through her discipleship, the church continued to be built upon her.

Ott wrote this about her friend: “When I saw her a week ago, she was tired but determined to go out to eat. We shared strawberry shortcake—her favorite, she said. But in a short week much has changed. Tonight, her arms and legs are retracting. Her eyes are wide open and staring. We want to talk, but I am the only one speaking, as she cannot. I thanked her for our friendship. I talked about our road trip a year ago and my sadness that our plans for another never came to be. I told her that I love her and that I promise to follow through on a request she’d made when she was diagnosed.

“I was drawn to do something. With my right thumb on her forehead, I traced the sign that we hold in common. One stroke down, then gently side to side. She closed her eyes and sighed. I bowed my head.

“Could it be,” Emlyn Ott writes, “that a view into the chasm of death and loss might be an opportunity for reaffirming what I believe? My friend will soon complete a life on earth after a yearlong fight. She expected she would win and live. She was frightened, determined and curious, all at the same time. She also believes that Jesus has called her into life and that death is not the final story.

“I sat with my friend and saw the past, the present and the future on her forehead. My challenge is to carry what I believe until the time when my body retracts and my life merges into memory, remembrance and incorporation into the future.

“I saw the image of the cross on Linda’s forehead. I heard her sigh, and I bowed my head again. Life will never be the same. Jesus the Christ. Painbearer. Lifegiver. Source of grace, challenge and hope.”

Emlyn Ott had a simple but powerful belief—that Jesus was the lifegiver for her friend Linda and for herself. And she acted on this belief by comforting her friend until the end.

Who do we say Jesus is? The answer and what we do with it is really all that matters.

As the church, we should be a welcoming space for those who don’t yet know what they believe or for those not yet ready to make a formal statement of faith.

Conviction does matter, though. All the extraneous stuff can fall away, but like Peter did, we should be ready to confess the singular most important element of our faith: Jesus is lord.

“Praise the mount, I’m fixed upon it. Mount of God’s unchanging love.”