

Becoming Sermon Series
#1 – From Believing to Belonging
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I remember vividly the first time I realized that I didn't have this faith thing figured out. As a side note, I get daily reminders of that now that I'm older. I was in my teens, playing basketball at a church with a group of friends when the pastor came through and struck up a conversation with us. I think he was looking to convert us wayward youth from our evil basketball-playing ways. He asked me if I believed in Jesus, and I said, "Yes," although at that point I wasn't really sure if I did or not. He asked me why I believed in Jesus, and, drawing upon my Sunday School lessons from a decade earlier, I said because he was the son of God and was raised from the dead. I thought, "That should shut this guy up." And then he looked at me and said, "That's a good answer. So what?" Uh oh. I remember thinking that maybe there was more to faith than having the right answer.

The beginning of a new year is a great time to take stock of where you are in life and make some resolutions about where you hope to go in the next 365 days. We do that with our health, our finances, our jobs...but do we do that with our faith? Faith is not a stagnant thing; it's not a possession; it's not something you either have or don't have. Instead, faith is dynamic, it's evolving, it's a living part of us. We understand our faith as a work in progress, but that statement assumes progress is being made.

For this sermon series, we'll be talking about the ways we are growing and evolving in our faith. The series title, "Becoming..." implies that we are on our way toward something, even though we probably won't ever get there. I doubt any of us will get to a point in life where we feel like we have this faith thing figured out, and if we do, then someone needs to look at us and ask us, "So what?" For these sermons, we'll be looking at the different ways our collective faith has changed over time, and how we as individuals and as a community can continue to change and grow as people of faith.

The journey for today's conversation is the one from believing to belonging. Let me say right at the start that this doesn't mean we should no longer believe, or that our beliefs aren't important. As we'll talk about, they are essential to our definition as followers of Christ. This is less an either/or than it is a shift in priority. The church is in the midst of a major paradigm shift, moving away from an emphasis on believing the right things and becoming...well, that's what we'll talk about.

Having the right beliefs, also called orthodoxy, wasn't always the focus of the church. When Jesus came to earth, he didn't say, "This is my command, that you believe the right doctrines." The angels didn't say to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of a great systematic theology." And when speaking to his potential disciples, Jesus didn't say, "Learn about me" or "figure me out." He said, "Follow me."

But somewhere along the line, following Jesus became defined as believing the correct things about him. In the second and third centuries, councils of religious leaders gathered to argue whether Jesus was fully human or fully divine, whether Mary was really a virgin, what Jesus' relationship to God was. These councils produced creeds which gave us the "right" answer to these questions, so that we could know definitively who had real faith and who didn't. If you assented to the right beliefs, you were in. If you didn't, you were burned at the stake. As you can imagine, there were a LOT of converts during those days.

The importance of correct beliefs was heightened with the Protestant Revolution and the invention of the printing press. Suddenly, not only did a person not have to do what the Catholic church told them to do, but they could now read the Bible for themselves! Throw in the period called the Enlightenment, which empowered people to use their brains to their fullest potential, and you have a real religious mess. You could put three people in a room with a Bible and come out with four different translations, five different interpretations of those translations, and six church splits. And everyone was convinced that their way of believing was the right way. No one ever said, “You know, I might be wrong about this, but I’m going to go ahead and start a new church anyway.”

So, for centuries, faith was defined as having the right beliefs, which of course meant having the same beliefs as the people in power. And for the most part, that worked, because no one wanted to challenge the authority of the church or risk sharing that they had serious doubts about their faith. But they did, and when they started to articulate them, the church didn’t have a good answer. Someone would ask, “Why is my wife dying of cancer?” And the church would say, “Well, it must be God’s will!” That’s a horrible answer to that question. Jesus said in our passage that just because a person says “Lord, Lord” doesn’t mean they are a follower of Christ. When people started perceiving Christianity as a religion of rules and regulations without any substantial response to the challenges of life, they began to drift away, and they are still drifting away. Just having the right beliefs wasn’t good enough anymore.

The “before” picture of organized religion for so long was that a believed the right things, they behaved the right way, and then they could belong. Behaving and believing were prerequisites to belonging to the church. But at some point, many churches – but not all of them – reversed that pattern. Now, for those churches making that shift, the emphasis is put in a different place. A person belongs, they behave, and then they come to belief. Christianity is moving from being a religion about God to an experience of God.

If that doesn’t make sense, think about it this way. Over Christmas, I spent some time with my Dad’s family, and they taught me how to play dominoes. I’d never played before, so I had no idea what I was doing. First, I tried reading the instructions. It was a lot of rules and “dos” and “don’ts,” and I didn’t quite follow. Next, my cousin Scott tried to explain the rules to me, but I still wasn’t getting it. “Wait, what happens when you play a double? What do I do with my train?” He patiently answered my questions, and then finally said, “Look, why don’t you just pull up a chair and get into the game and you can learn as you go.” And I did.

If we’re honest, isn’t what faith is like? We can try to learn all the rules, the right doctrines and the correct beliefs. We can intellectually assent to what we think is correct. We can have someone else tell us what we should believe. But the only way we can really learn what we believe is by getting involved and playing the game. We belong (OK, I’ll sit down at the table), we behave (I’ll start playing the game), and then we figure out what we believe (ah, I get how this game works!). We belong (OK, I’ll start going to church), we behave (sure, I’ll go to a Sunday School class or help with an outreach project), and then we believe (hey, I’m starting to see how this faith thing works!). There’s a reason that, when a person joins Crestwood, I ask them if they trust that Jesus Christ is the son of God and if they promise to spend the rest of their lives figuring out what that means. Let’s be honest, if having the right beliefs is a prerequisite to belonging, should any of us be here?

Like I said at the beginning, that doesn’t mean that our beliefs aren’t important. They are incredibly so. Part of what defines us as Christians and as a church is the peculiarity of what we believe, specifically that Jesus is the son of God who came to earth to make God’s kingdom real.

There are some of us who are as certain of this as they are of their own existence. There are others of us who have serious doubts about whether or not this is true. And there are some of us who have our good days and have our bad days. The historical church's problem isn't that we've had the wrong beliefs; it's that we've thought having the right beliefs is what mattered most.

We already know about the importance of belonging in other parts of our life, right? A few years ago, when I was walking down the street of tiny Talkeetna, Alaska, a guy on the other side hollered at me, "Hey, nice shirt!" I was wearing a UK shirt, and when I look at him, he pointed to his UK hat. We shared a common bond that you could argue is its own religion. There's another community I'm a part of that makes me feel very important, because every time I swipe my membership card, I'm told, "Welcome, valued customer!" We're a part of a lot of communities. So what makes belonging to a church different than belonging to a gym or to Costco?

As a church, what bonds us together is our belief in Jesus Christ...but is that enough? I would say that it's not, because we can all say really nice things about Jesus and then go out into the world and make a real mess of things. I would say that what makes a church community unique is how we live out our belonging, how we contribute to the well-being of this community of which we're a part, and how we help this community contribute to the well-being of the world. I know plenty of people who join a church, attend for a few months, and then never darken the door again. Do they truly belong? Belonging doesn't happen to you; belonging is something you do by the way you contribute to the sense and purpose of community.

You don't have to believe before you can belong, because we may never fully believe. And yet, I have found some of my greatest epiphanies of faith have come in the midst of living out my belonging. While I was a seminary student struggling to figure out what I believed so that I could lead others, I made a hospital visit to an elderly lady dying of cancer. I was nervous going into the room, because I had never been in that situation before, and I was afraid she would ask me a theological question I couldn't answer. We made small talk for a few minutes, and then she said, "Kory, can I ask you something?" Oh no. Here it comes. Why am I dying? What's Heaven like? Does God still love me? Instead, she asked, "Could you feed me my tapioca pudding?" So I grabbed a napkin and spoon and fed her tapioca pudding. And I realized at that moment that faith wasn't about having the right answers; it was about belonging to each other and to God.

I know what I believe...most days. Then there are other days, when my faith is challenged by cancer and divorce and my whole understanding of God topples over like a row of dominoes. I'm thankful to belong to a church that doesn't kick me out because I don't always get this faith thing right. If you're like me, I want you to know you still belong. You don't have to swipe a card or pass a test. If you belong to God, you belong with us, and you are welcome at this table. Our denomination was founded because people were putting believing over belonging when it came to communion. They were denying people the right to come to this table because they didn't believe the right things. But through his death and resurrection, Jesus says to us, "You belong to God. You belong at this table."

But, please hear me, don't stop there. Having the right beliefs isn't enough, but neither is just signing the attendance pad. Belonging means being a part of each other's lives in ways that reflect, no matter how dimly, the light of Christ in each of us. Belonging means continuing to ask questions and voice concerns and articulate doubts until, maybe when you least expect, maybe even over a dish of tapioca pudding, God pulls back the curtain just a bit and your faith is affirmed, maybe even strengthened.

We will never experience the presence of God if we wait in our mind to understand it. We will never find the transformation so many of us are looking for if we don't pull up a chair and get into the game, finding ways to connect, to relate, to give, to serve. Our faith is not a system of beliefs. Jesus didn't say, "This is my command, that you believe the right doctrines." Do you know what he said? "This is my command, that you love one another." If you're not sure what you believe, just pull up a chair and start with that.