

“BEE-LIEVE”

By Karen Ramthun

Sunday, September 2, 2018

The story of Buzzy the Bumblebee makes some good points. We can't always believe what we read, we're often influenced by the words and/or actions of others, and sometimes, it's difficult to believe in ourselves.

I have been mulling the word, “believe” over and over in my mind ever since I agreed to give the message today.

First, I was thinking; what do we believe as a denomination, the United Church of Christ. We are often thought of as a creedless church. We treat creeds, such as the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed, as testimonies to faith rather than tests of faith, but do not recite them weekly in worship as many traditional Christian churches do. However, we do have a UCC Statement of Faith, and I will read it, as I feel we need to refresh ourselves with these words now and again.

United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit,
God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God,
and to your deeds we testify:
You call the worlds into being,
create persons in your own image,
and set before us the ways of life and death.
You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin,
You judge people and nations by your righteous will
declared through prophets and apostles.
In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior,
you have come to us and shared our common lot,
conquering sin and death
and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races.

You call us into your church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be your servants in the service of others,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world
and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table
to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
your presence in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen

Next, what does our local church believe?

Our local church, First Congregational United Church of Christ, voted to become open and affirming around 2004, and this is our Open and Affirming Statement in part.

Believing that every person is a child of God
invested with worth and dignity,
and believing that every person
is a recipient of God's grace...
we joyfully welcome and affirm all persons –
those of every age, gender, sexual orientation,
personal ability, race, ethnic background,
or faith background...

As Lisa said at the beginning of the service, "Wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcomed, affirmed and celebrated here."

We also have a Mission Statement that is often on the front of your weekly worship bulletin that says:

Following Jesus, our mission is to serve God
by building an inclusive community where uplifting worship
and relevant messages deepen spirituality
and inspire acts of justice, service, and compassion.

WOW! That's a tall order, but I think we keep getting better in fulfilling our mission.

Thirdly, what do I personally believe?

I believe in a triune God: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, and that Christ died for our sins, rose from the dead, and will grant us everlasting life with Him.

I believe in the love that my family has for each other.

I believe that to carry out my responsibilities throughout the week, I do better when I worship in this community of faith, and am nourished in so many ways through God's word, music, prayer and sermons.

I believe that Judy Nielsen's Bible Study classes are important in my life, because I admit that I don't often just sit and study God's word on my own like I know I should.

I believe that I can promote the mission of First Congregational by serving in ways that are joyful to me. They include participating in our music programs, being a liturgist, visiting our people who cannot get to church regularly through the Congregational Care group, the greeting card ministry, doing the Coffee Hour with Bruce, baking for the Pride Festival, etc.

In regards to helping support the ministries here, I've put some sign-up sheets in the narthex. Could you teach Sunday School? If you've never done a coffee hour, sign up, and we'll help you get started the first time or two. It doesn't have to be a buffet! Could you be an usher, or a greeter on Sunday morning welcoming everyone who comes through the doors, personally guiding newcomers to where they go to get to the sanctuary?

We have many senior citizens who have faithfully served the church for decades and find that now, it can be too difficult to help with board positions and some of the previously mentioned tasks. Also, sometimes the people who are currently serving can get burn-out and would love to see some new faces doing those tasks. As you leave the sanctuary today, if you are so moved, please examine those sheets and try something new.

I believe in love in this place! I had been baptized at Pilgrim Congregational in Lansing when I was four years old. (Let's see, that was about 40 years ago?) Pilgrim continued to be my church home growing up. Bruce and I were married there, our children, Christopher and Kimberlee were baptized there, and our niece, Erica Stoll, and Chris and Kim were confirmed there. When it was time to leave Pilgrim and find a new church, we landed here (and I'm so glad!). We could feel the genuine love and acceptance people have for each other here, and those attributes carry out into the world.

As Jesus said in Mark 12:28-31 when asked what commandment was first, He said, "The first is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."

I believe in the future of First Congregational UCC. We have an awesome bridge pastor, Barb Edema, beginning her preaching on Rally Sunday. We are anticipating a settled pastor in the months ahead. We have the largest bell choir in the area, and in the past have had 20 or more ringers, thanks to our director, Darlene Banks with the help of her husband, Ben. Brandon Frost, our new choir director, will begin directing the choral choir next week. We have many amazing ministries, such as Sunday School, our monthly support of the Grand Ledge Food Bank, WGOD – a women's book study, church boards, our Open and Affirming group and Trunk or Treat, to name a few.

And hey - we gained four new members just over a month ago – YAY!

We have a lot going for us, and a bright future to come, as we continue to be Christ's hands at work in our church, our community, our country, our world.

The church with the blue roof is just a building – until it is filled with us: WE are the church; we are a family – BEE-LIEVE!

Amen (Karen Ramthun)