

**August 27, 2017 – Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time  
“Credo”**

**Rev. Dr. Scott Landis  
Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20**

Many of you know that I have the privilege to serve as spiritual faculty of our denomination's CREDO program. CREDO is a mid-career assessment program for clergy providing an opportunity for ministers in all settings to get away and in a retreat setting take a deep, personal look at who they are with respect to their professional role. The assessment includes an in-depth look at one's financial well-being, and their sense of vocation, i.e., whether they made the right choice or accurately heard God's call in their life. Participants also spend time focusing on their emotional and physical health, and finally – my area – spiritual vitality.

CREDO technically means “I believe” – in this case what “I believe” about myself. But CREDO takes this all a bit further by inviting participants to think of it in terms of that to which “I give my life.”

And that's what I'd like you to keep in mind today as I offer my thoughts on these two remarkable passages from Matthew and Romans. Credo – what is it YOU believe? AND, second, What is it you're willing to give YOUR life to?

It's THAT finger to the chest that Jesus challenged his disciples to consider in this story from the gospel – first beating around the bush with the more general query, “Who do people say that I am?” To which they respond, “Well some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Incidentally, these are all dead guys which I doubt made Jesus feel all that affirmed. Undaunted, he pressed them even further, “But who do YOU say that I am?”

Before we dip into these texts any further, I'd like for us to hit pause for a moment and give you some time to ponder this question yourself. Who do you say Jesus is? What is it that you believe about Jesus? In your bulletin, there is a space to jot down some of your thoughts. I'd like you to take a few minutes to answer this question for yourself. You'll not be asked to share your answers. This is for you – your Credo – what do you believe when asked the question – “Who is Jesus, for you?” Give it your best shot.

[Allow a few minutes for pondering and writing.]

We don't know how long it took for Peter to break the silence. But he eventually took the bait. He jumped in! Offered his testimony – his witness. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” I'm not sure Peter had any idea what he meant by that – neither did Jesus as he responded, “Good for you Peter – but you didn't come up with that answer on your own. It was God who revealed that to you.” The other disciples were silent

(crickets – as we described last Sunday) apparently not yet ready to commit – or simply didn't know. I wonder what they would have written on their little sheets of paper?

As Jesus pointed out in his subsequent comments to Peter, how we respond actually says more about us than it does about him. "You are Peter," Jesus says, "The rock. It's upon you that I will build my church. Your foundation is so strong that not even the gates of hell will prevail against it.

How DID you respond? Who do you say Jesus is – for YOU? Indeed, how I respond says as much about me as it does about Jesus. (Pause)

In a humorous yet niggling Stillspeaking devotional this past Tuesday, Matt Fitzgerald got at this in a slightly different way. Being a UCC pastor, Matt inherently understands us UCC types very well – particularly our seeming inability to make any definite assertion **on just about anything** without some kind of qualifier. Using a tactic known as the *via negativa*, we often try and say what we mean or describe something based on what it is NOT rather than what it is. Matt writes:

I don't travel much, but I've been to Canada. Here's what I heard: "Oh. You're an *American*."

"No! Not that kind." He quickly qualifies. "I don't own a gun. I've never driven a golf cart and I *hate* Kid Rock."

More than one hundred dinner parties have left him well-versed in this sort of defensiveness, he continues.

"Oh. You're a *minister*."

"No! Not that kind."

"Well what then? Episcopalian?"

"No way. Incense? it's like they think the sanctuary's a dorm room and the RA's on the prowl."

"Southern Baptist?"

"Did you just call me a homophobe?"

"So you're liberal, like Unitarians."

"No! The last time I went to a Unitarian church the preacher used Bruce Springsteen lyrics instead of scripture."

"Lutheran?"

"Nope, they've got Bishops."

"So what are you?"

"I tell you one thing, I'm not a Catholic."<sup>1</sup>

You see, we often spend so much time defending ourselves – stating what we are not – or what we do NOT believe, so that others don't get the wrong impression, that we may have lost the ability to state clearly and succinctly who we are or who Jesus is for that matter.

So, you're a Christian, "Well yes, but not that kind of Christian." I think you get the point.

Maybe that's why we resist God or Jesus for that matter. And maybe that's what gave you some difficulty answering the question, "who do you say that I am?" If opposition is what makes life interesting, or what makes *us* interesting, we're not going to embrace the One who promises to end it. Can you define yourself without naming the things you hate or that which you are **not**? Can you do the same for Jesus?

Paul takes on this whole issue in his theological credo in Romans when he invites followers, "Do not be conformed to this world – but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." What a beautiful and profound statement. Paul is inviting us into our own personal transformation – a renewal that begins in our head as we ponder just what it is that we do believe – but eventually must make its way down into our heart as we jump in with both feet like Peter and testify to what it is that we love. My credo - that to which I am willing to give my life. It's that personal commitment that I invite you to ponder today. It's what I believe Jesus is calling us to.

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Fitzgerald, Stillspeaking Writer's Group, UCC Daily Devotional, August 22, 2017.

Oh, it's so much easier to denounce all the things that are wrong with our world and with others who just don't seem to get it – at least from our perspective. To point our fingers at others and announce that "We are not like them." But what Jesus is asking us to consider is something fundamentally very different: "Who ARE you? What DO you believe?" It's part and parcel of the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Who is Jesus for you?

He's not asking us what we are not. What we don't believe. How we are not like others. Rather he is asking us who we are. What we believe about Jesus and how our lives are different because of that belief. [Pause]

I hope you'll take your little sheets along with you today. Add to them. Delete from them. Sit with them and ask yourself again and again, "Who do you say that I am?" What does that say about me?

Amen.