

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: November 20, 2016
Sermon Title: This I Believe (Thank you, Edward R. Murrow)
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:8-12

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Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

There's a book bouncing around our Church, *A Higher Call*. A rather astounding true story about a World War II encounter between a German fighter pilot and an American B-17 bomber crew. The bomber had flown over Germany, dropped its bombs, and was headed back to England. But it was horribly damaged, some of the crew were killed or injured, the plane itself was shot to shreds, barely able to fly, an easy target for German fighter pilots and German anti-aircraft gunners. It seemed their fate was sealed. Either they would be shot out of the air and killed or crash into the sea and drown.

To their absolute shock, a German fighter pilot flew right up next to the bomber, wing to wing, cockpit to cockpit, eyeball to eyeball, and escorted the bomber safely across Germany, preventing any further attack. Miraculously, the bomber made it back to England.

Forty years later, the German and American pilots met, and of course, the first question was "Why? Why did you let us go? Why not shoot us down? Why lead us to safety?" The answer was astoundingly simple. The German pilot was a Christian. Yes, he was a warrior, a highly decorated fighter pilot, but sometimes life pushes us to the extreme, and we have to find out who we really are at our heart, at our core.

In that moment, Franz Stigler remembered who he was: a cross-carrying, rosary-praying Catholic, hoping to be a better baptized Christian. He had been taught that even as a fighter pilot, sometimes there is a "higher calling."

Today's sermon is more of an exercise than a sermon. I'm inviting you to find your "higher calling," your center, your core. At the end of today's service, we will sing a wonderful old Gospel hymn, "I Know Whom I Have Believed," based on the Scripture lesson we just heard.

Paul's life was full of drama and danger and challenges. He was beaten, arrested, imprisoned; people wanted him dead. He ended up on trial for his life, and since we never hear from him again, the assumption is he lost. Yet, in the middle of it, Paul makes this incredible statement of faith: "I know whom I have believed and am *persuaded* that he is able to keep that which I've *committed* unto him against that day." In other words, "My core is Christ, and I will never, ever lose hope, give up, freak out, or run away. I am too strong. Heaven is too real. I am going to live this life without fear of anything or anyone." "*I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day.*"

I said that was his "statement of faith." In Latin, "Credo," I believe. In English "Creed," what we believe. The real impetus for this sermon is not the election. It's this book, *This I Believe*. I still have the receipt for it: July 1, 2015, 16 months before the election! I just thought it was a cool book that would make a good sermon some day. Like today. The book's title is *This I Believe* and is based on a 1951, *1951* CBS Radio show hosted by Edward R. Murrow. Every day the legendary Murrow would invite people, mostly famous people, to come on the radio and, well, let me quote Murrow's opening monologue:

"We bring you a new series of radio broadcasts, 'This I Believe,' presenting the personal philosophies of thoughtful people who have nothing more in common than integrity, a real honesty, talking out loud about the rules they live by, the basic values of their lives." Their "credo." Listen to this: he goes on to say, "We hardly need to be reminded that we are living in an age of confusion." (Remember, this is 1951!) "A lot of us have traded in our beliefs

for bitterness and cynicism, for a heavy package of despair, or a quivering portion of hysteria." (Written in 1951!) "Courage, fortitude, and faith are in short supply." (Again, in 1951) "Around us all . . . There is an enveloping cloud of fear . . . Which provokes others of us to see the images of witches in a neighbor's yard and stampedes us to burn down his house." (In 1951.)

With that introduction, he turned to great Americans to find out what sustained them, what gave them hope, what was their core, their "higher calling," their creed.

Sixty years later this idea has been revived on NPR, and the testimonies of faith gathered in the book from the original 1951 series to our own contemporaries. Each person is asked to answer, "What I believe, what keeps me going? Positive? Bold?"

There's Leonard Bernstein, who used to be a neighbor of ours, just around the corner, who couldn't be clearer: "I believe in people," he declared.

A modern musician, Loudon Wainwright III, says, "I believe in inspiration and mystery."

Jackie Robinson: "I believe God sustained me in my fight."

Colin Powell "I believe in America. I believe in our people. I believe in an America with a big, open, charitable heart. I believe in an America that is confused and noisy but still a beacon of light in the darkest corners of the world."

Martha Graham: "I believe in practice."

Ben Carson, "I believe there is no job more important than parenting."

And many, many more people said, "I believe in happiness," "I believe in law, truth, and doubt." "I believe we are each other's business." "I believe in a daily walk with God."

And how about this one from Mark Shields, the political journalist: "I believe in politics. I believe in people who run for public office. I believe in politicians who are courageous."

The point of these exercises is to get people to get to the heart of the matter, to the heart of their matter, to the heart of what matters. You may have noticed the little box below my sermon title, a *little* box. Try writing your core, your creed, your top, top, top, top, most important heart of the

matter for you. When all else fails, what, for you, won't fail? What do you believe so fully, so powerfully, that no sickness can shake it, no election can shake it, no personal loss can shake it, nothing can shake it? And notice, you need only a *little* box to get to the core.

The New Testament Bible writers had it easy. St. Peter, in his letters, St. Paul, in his letters, which make up half of the New Testament; Matthew, Mark, and John in their Gospels, they had it easy. They knew Jesus personally, intimately. They ate with him. Listened to him. Followed him. Lived with him. And then he was dead, killed. Brutally murdered. Then he was alive. Very much alive, present, with them. Let me tell you, that made their "This I Believe" pretty easy. "We're with him. We're sticking with him. He's our 'Blessed Assurance.' He is what I believe." Of course!

But St. Peter *and* Jesus both agree it's tougher for us. Our faith comes to us circuitously, round about, passed on to us; we got it second hand, third hand, we got it from Sunday School or Church or our parents; or we think about it, pray about it, come to it by hook or by crook. So it may be a little tougher for some of us to say Jesus is the sum and substance of "This I Believe." We may use other words to describe the heart of who we are, the core of our being, the foundation of our lives. So I challenge you to try. When push comes to shove, who are you? What do *you* take a stand for?

I went to see "Hacksaw Ridge" last Sunday. I highly recommend it *and* I strongly warn you. It is gory. Mel Gibson directed it, and he loves gore, and modern technology enables us to see and feel the horrors of war to a degree that is hard to stomach.

"Hacksaw Ridge" is a true story, World War II; a young farm boy enlists in the Army but refuses to carry a gun. He's not drafted, he enlists. But he refuses to carry a gun. Well, you can imagine the drama of basic training, as he tries to fit in with his unit under the withering assault of other soldiers, and his sergeant and the officers. He's beaten, mocked, humiliated, imprisoned.

You see, he's a Christian, a certain kind of Christian, a pacifist. It's how he was raised. It's the Church he grew up in. It's the Bible he read. It says, "Thou shalt not kill." It doesn't say, "Thou shalt not serve, thou shalt not risk thy life, thou shalt not save other soldiers." So he wants to serve. He wants to risk his life. He wants to save other soldiers. He just won't carry a gun. The Army gave him every out. He already had an exemption. They offered others. He refused. He fought for the right to be in the fight, as a medic, without a gun, to serve God *and* country.

But he doesn't waver. He's an American, and he's a Christian. He wants to serve and stick to his principles. Desmond Doss ended up saving 75 soldiers during the fierce battle of Okinawa and was honored by America with the Congressional Medal of Honor. He knew what he stood for, and he stuck to it. That's what it means to have a creed, a personal creed, a real creed.

Of course, many Christians have formal creeds, historic statements of faith that summarize theological beliefs. The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Westminster Confession, the Baltimore Catechism. We don't use creeds much in our Church. Not because we don't believe in anything, it just goes back to our emphasis on individual freedom. You and I stand before God, and we have to account for ourselves. The Virgin Birth is a nice doctrine. I happen to believe in it. I don't think I'll be asked about it. A Church like ours is more inclined to say to you, "Here is the Bible. Look at the life and teachings of Jesus, apply it, practice it, do it." Your real creed is how you live your story, not a checklist.

This book, *This I Believe*, has morphed into an ongoing movement, inviting anyone to write their "credo," even submit it if you want. They have some simple rules: be brief, be positive, be personal, focus on one core belief, and tell a story. Because that's really what a life of faith is, living your story the way you believe.

So I close by reading my favorite story from the book. It's called "Why I Close My Restaurant" by George Mardikian. Mardikian escaped the slaughter of the Armenians during World War I, came to America as a refugee, started out washing dishes in San Francisco, and ended up being awarded America's highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom.

"Every Christmas eve, I close my restaurant to the public. My wife and I become the hired help to serve our employees. We try to give them the finest Christmas repast. This exchange of roles is symbolic. This is an ancient Armenian custom we have introduced into our American life.

"Each national group has brought something of its heritage in the form of thousands of different customs, which have become integral parts of life in this country. I believe that true humility is a basic need of mankind today. Why do I believe this? Aside from the fact that Jesus Christ taught it, my own experience seems to me a living testimony of its truth.

"As a young man in my native Armenia, I was organizing boy scout troops when the Turks and the Russians invaded the Republic of Armenia. I was captured and thrown into prison. I nearly starved to death in this time of crisis. An older and wiser inmate said to me, "Don't lose hope." He was right,

for some American friends in the Near East Relief helped me to escape. They used the ruse of telling my captors that I was an American. I became an American before I became an American.

"Eventually, I was able to work my way to the United States. Here I was, a humble immigrant boy crossing the Atlantic to a country that seemed to answer all my prayers for happiness and freedom. My feelings when I first saw the Statue of Liberty cannot be described. Even today, when I pass it on my frequent trips to Europe, a feeling—something like reverence—comes over me.

"When I entered the shower baths at Ellis Island, I found plenty of soap and water. I used them freely because it seemed to me that I was washing away all the hatreds and prejudices of the old world. As I stepped out of the shower and came face to face with a guard in uniform, he actually smiled at me. The smile of a stranger may seem to be a fleeting, insignificant moment to others, but I remember it vividly because it set the mood for my new life. It was perhaps an omen of the joy and friendship I was to find about me.

"When I first arrived, I spoke very little English and had practically no money. But I did have enthusiasm, the will to work, and bright hopes for a new life ahead. I got on the westbound train for San Francisco. Everywhere I went strangers were willing to help, and I felt very humble.

"This wonderful land has been good to me. It has given me friends by the hundreds in all walks of life. I believe that in this society, where love and mutual respect are fostered and encouraged, I must do more than contribute my share toward the material and the spiritual well-being of all. I believe that friendship, which grows out of love and true humility, is the most important thing in life."

(Mardikian, George. "Why I Close My Restaurant Door." *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*. Allison, Jay, and Dan Gediman, eds. New York: Picador, 2006. 153-155. Print.)

What's your creed?

And now, let's stand and sing the old Gospel hymn, "I Know Whom I Have Believed."

*I know not why God's wondrous grace
To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.*

Refrain:

*But "I know Whom I have believed,
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I've committed
Unto Him against that day."*

*I know not how this saving faith
To me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word
Wrought peace within my heart.*

*I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.*

*I know not when my Lord may come,
At night or noontide fair,
Nor if I'll walk the vale with Him,
Or "meet Him in the air."*