

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 22, 2017
Sermon Title: This I Believe
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

“This I Believe” Litany

- Deacon:** *I believe in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)*
- Congregation:** I believe thou shalt not kill, or covet your neighbor’s anything, or lie, or steal, or use God’s name in vain. (Exodus 20:7-17)
- Deacon:** *I believe that we must do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. (Micah 6:8)*
- Congregation:** I believe that whatever we do for the least of them, our brothers and sisters, we do for Jesus. (Matthew 25:40)
- Deacon:** *I believe that blessed are the meek who shall inherit the earth; and the peacemakers who are the children of God; and the merciful, who shall obtain mercy. (Matthew 5:5, 9, 7)*
- Congregation:** I believe that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believeth in him will not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)
- Deacon:** *I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. (Matthew 16:16)*

Congregation: I believe that Jesus saw his disciples in the middle of the lake, with the wind against them, and he went out to them, walking on the water. (Mark 6:48)

Deacon: *I believe that Christmas announced Good News of Great Joy for all people that the Savior has been born.* (Luke 2:10-11)

Congregation: I believe that Easter announces that Jesus is not dead. He is risen. (Luke 24:5)

Deacon: *I believe that the Kingdom of God is within you.* (Luke 17:21)

All Together: I believe that Jesus is coming again; and that he will lead us to springs of living water, and will wipe away every tear from our eyes. (Revelation 20:6, 7:17)

Today's worship has been in the making for over a year. I bought a book called *This I Believe*, which really intrigued me. "This I Believe" was a popular radio show on CBS over 60 years ago. The great Edward R. Morrow would interview prominent Americans who would address the question "This I Believe" in a few short, tight paragraphs.

After a long hiatus, NPR started doing it again, inviting famous and not-so-famous Americans to try the same question, and then NPR took old ones from the '50s and new ones and compiled them in a book. I bought it, read it, loved it. I preached a sermon about it back in November, then we decided to invite you to try it, made it our "Book Chat" selection for the month, sold 40 copies, and many of you started thinking about it. What are your bottom-line beliefs? No guidelines. Just be brief, be specific. This isn't like your college term paper where you have two or three good ideas plus nine pages of baloney to impress the teacher!

For today, we said, stick with your two or three good ideas. When Rachel offered to lead our adult discussion class, using the "This I Believe" idea and book, I decided to turn the whole Sunday over to it. The whole idea is to help each of us get to the heart of what matters—in anything.

Our Bible study for these first two months of 2017 I've titled "The Absolute Essentials of the Christian Faith," kind of a lofty title, but it's a way for us to spend eight weeks working our way to the heart of what is truly important.

Our first hymn today, "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name," is a powerful, *powerful* declaration of Jesus as the heart and soul of who we are. Our model. Our exemplar. Our inspiration.

Much of church life is putting forth an idea that will lead us forward. That's the purpose of a "guiding principle" core belief. So start thinking now, and join us in the parlor after church. You'll be glad you did.

Our son Andres brought me an article he found on the Internet about Pope Francis. The pope was talking about the need to live our faith, really *live* it, not just talk about it. He said there should be a linkage between what we say we believe and what we *do* because of our beliefs. He said there are a lot of people who say, "I am Catholic, I go to mass," but then, he said, they ignore their grandparents or don't help the poor or turn their backs on others. "Those who do this are nothing but Christian parrots—words, words, words," said the Pope. "Christian Parrots." (Forster, Katie. (2017, January 16). *There is 'no point' in going to church if you don't really believe in it.* Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk>

The Bible says the same. St. John asks, "If we see someone in need and do nothing, where is the love of God in that?" (1 John 3:17) St. James is even blunter, "What good is it if you have faith but no deeds? Suppose you see someone in need, hungry, cold, and all you do is say, "Go in peace, be warm, take care, toodle-oo." And you do nothing. What good is that?" (James 2:15) That's the crux of religion, isn't it? The intersection between holy sounding beliefs and our everyday actions.

The Muslims are facing it now, aren't they? Most Muslims proclaim, "Islam is a religion of peace." But they are undermined by all those terrorists who shout, "God is great," who quote their Holy Book while murdering people all around the world. For Christianity, if we follow Jesus, we are rooted in mercy, love, compassion, gentleness, hope, forgiveness, peace. But those are not the qualities we often see as the public face of Christianity. Christianity is more likely to show finger-wagging, condemnation, divisiveness.

Today, our whole Sunday is given to the idea of "This I Believe." What is our core? What is the essence of our Christian faith? What is our bottom line? Now, the truth is we can apply this idea to all the key things in our lives. America just had inauguration, a good time to ask yourself: what is your bottom line, what are your core beliefs about America? Or, take business. You're all interested in business. Maybe you're a businessman, businesswoman, own your own business, or retired from business. We all count on business: its activity, its profit. Do you have an absolute, essential core

belief about business? Is it “every man for himself,” profits above all, ethics, free market, America first, globalism? And I’ll bet your family life is run on some key principles. Maybe you never wrote them down or articulated them. Maybe today is a good time to try. What are your core beliefs about family?

But right now, we are focused on our faith. What do you believe? What would you take to the bank? What’s unshakable? Foundational? Essential? We actually dig at that all year long. Small groups, study classes, Confirmation. I’ve done surveys, asking about theology, personal behavior, and social issues. In one survey people found using drugs and being a Christian were incompatible. But being a Christian and lying was overwhelmingly O.K. That’s the eternal divide between saying one thing and doing another.

If you follow football, you may know the name Johnny Manziel. He was a superstar college quarterback, Heisman Trophy winner as the best of the best, but he has been a total bust as a pro. His boozing and domestic violence have destroyed his career and reputation. Johnny’s trying to regain his life. He’s doing A.A., admitting he’s an alcoholic, and trying to convince the world, including pro football, that he’s a new man. He’s repenting, apologizing, and promising. Listen carefully to what he said: “Have to LIVE these words, not just TWEET them,” with LIVE and TWEET in all caps. “*Have to LIVE these words, not just TWEET them.*” That’s the struggle of all good intentions, including faith. (Hendricks, Jaclyn. “Johnny Manziel: This Is How I Knew I Was at Rock Bottom.” *The New York Times* 20 Jan. 2016. Print.)

Today I’ve already put a lot of words in your mouth, did you notice? We said the Apostles’ Creed together, the most historic statement of faith in all of Christianity. “Creed” means “belief.” It comes from the Latin, “credo”: “I believe.” Down through the ages, various Christian groups have come up with various creeds to define, to state clearly what they believe. Some churches and some pastors (like me) resist using a man-made creed, and resist making everybody repeat it. I don’t like forcing us all to say something together that some of you don’t mean. Or causing some to refuse to join in what everyone else is doing. Either way, it’s awkward.

But today I had you say the Apostles’ Creed (or mumble it, or at least hear it). Plus, I wrote a long litany just for today. Each sentence began with “I believe,” followed by some article of faith taken straight from the Bible. Added to the usual stuff, the Prayer of Confession, the Lord’s Prayer, the opening hymn, the Doxology, I’ve put a lot of words in your mouth. You have stated a *lot* of beliefs. You declared out loud your belief in the Virgin Birth, in hell and heaven, in the Resurrection, in Judgment Day, in the

Trinity. You've declared your belief in God's creation, the Ten Commandments, in justice with mercy, in helping others, in Jesus's Atonement, in Jesus's Divinity, in Jesus's walking on water, in the essential truths of Christmas and Easter, in the Kingdom of God, and the second coming of Christ. Congratulations!

By anyone's standard, you are 100 percent purebred. Totally Orthodox. Fully approved. Dyed-in-the-wool, thoroughly accredited, Ph.D.-level Christians! Well done!

Except . . . but . . . wait a minute! At least a few of you are thinking, first, I tricked you into doing it! And second, are all of those statements "absolutely essential" to being a Christian?

Since I'm preaching, I'll go first. I happen to believe in the Virgin Birth, as impossible as it seems. I believe Jesus walked on water, as crazy as that sounds. But I believe it. But I don't think either one amounts to a hill of beans when it comes to salvation, to eternal life, to getting into heaven, or to just plain old being a Christian.

I got to this point based on some troubling personal experiences. One I've told you before, and it's in one of my books, but it bears repeating. One evening I was in the Central African country of Zaire (formerly the Congo). Our van was stopped at a checkpoint by armed soldiers. One shoved his machine gun into the van, threatened to kill us, demanded everything we had. Our courageous driver told the would-be murderer, "You can't do this! This man is a missionary, a Christian!" At which point the guy with the machine gun in my face starts beaming. "I'm a Christian too!" he proclaimed. Oh, goody! I'm being violated by a fellow believer.

In my life I've been threatened, fired, bribed, propositioned, cheated, lied to, lied about, beaten up (literally), stabbed in the back (figuratively) by fellow believers, co-religionists, Bible-thumping, Apostles'-Creed-repeating, Church-going Christians. Which, over time, as led me to wonder . . . who the heck is a Christian? Or what the heck is a Christian?

Let me tell you where I'm coming from. All of you (except for visitors today) know that 34 years ago I began some mission work in India. We call it FOCI, "Friends of Christ in India." I began it for two reasons. First, God told me to. But that's a story for another day. Second, I met a wonderful gentleman, Azariah, an extraordinary Indian Christian who was already doing amazing things without my help. So I decided to help him. Maybe 20, 22 years ago, Azariah visited me from India when I was a pastor up in the Berkshires.

I had him do some teaching and preaching in my Church, and in the middle of one event, he started talking about "Christlikeness." *Christlikeness*. I tell you it hit me like a ton of bricks. That's what it's all about, being Christlike. It's not about being a Christian or Protestant or Catholic or Congregationalist or a Church member or memorizing the Apostles' Creed.

If you believe in the Virgin Birth *and* put a machine gun in my face to rob me, I'm not counting you as being on my team. I think the "absolute essential," I think the "heart of the matter," the core, the "credo," the "This I Believe" is getting up each morning and trying to be as much like Christ as we can the rest of the day. That's a tall order, it might even be impossible, but if our zeal is to be Christlike, that's our goal, our standard. That's what I believe we are about.

I played a lot of baseball for a lot of years. I always batted over 300, sometimes over 400, once or twice, over 500. Not bad. But my zeal was always to bat a thousand. I wanted to get a hit every at bat, every game, all season long. And by that standard, I failed. When I batted 300, I failed 70 percent of the time. When I batted 500, I failed 50 percent of the time. And what I did after every game—and my son will tell you the same thing from when I coached him—we'd go home and analyze every at bat: what went right, what went wrong, how to do better, how to improve, how to correct. In baseball, that's Ted Williams-likeness. In life, that's Christlikeness.

Now, Churches are like private clubs. They can make whatever rules they want for membership. You have to believe this or that, you have to speak in tongues, be baptized by immersion, read only the King James Version of the Bible, believe every noun, verb, and adjective, oppose women in leadership, or gays in membership or in marriage, or believe in predestination, the depravity of man.

Every Church has its wrinkles, its idiosyncrasies. Fair enough. But Christlikeness isn't a private club. It's a life. It's a life that goes with us into every thought, every word, every decision, every action, every day. And sometimes we bat 300, sometimes we bat 500, sometimes we get thrown a curveball, a sudden change of pace, and we swing and miss completely. And sometimes there is a high hard one that comes right at our head and knocks us backward, shakes us up, takes away our confidence. O.K., we take a breath, shake off the dirt. Dig in. Battle back to batting a thousand, to being Christlike. That's what I believe.

So let me make it simple for you. I'll close with what Jesus said. Not religion. Not denomination. Not creed. Not me. Just Jesus. It's what we studied this week in Bible Study, Jesus's description of Judgment Day. He says the whole

universe gets divided like sheep and goats, two sides. On one side, Jesus says to the group, "Enter my kingdom. When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave me drink. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was alone, you visited me." Period. Surprisingly, the people being rewarded are shocked. "Thanks for heaven, but honestly, we never saw you hungry, thirsty, naked, alone. We would have remembered that. We can't recollect ever doing that stuff for you!"

"Doesn't matter," Jesus says, "you did it for somebody, you did it for me." Period. It's what he did. It's what we do. It's Christlikeness. Period.

Let's conclude with another beautiful hymn, "In the Garden. No. 227"

*I come to the garden alone,
while the dew is still on the roses;
and the voice I hear falling on my ear,
the Son of God discloses.*

Refrain:

*And he walks with me, and he talks with me,
and he tells me I am his own,
and the joy we share, as we tarry there,
none other has ever known.*

*He speaks, and the sound of his voice,
is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
and the melody that he gave to me
within my heart is ringing. [Refrain]*

*I'd stay in the garden with him
though the night around me be falling,
but he bids me go; through the voice of woe
his voice to me is calling. [Refrain]*