

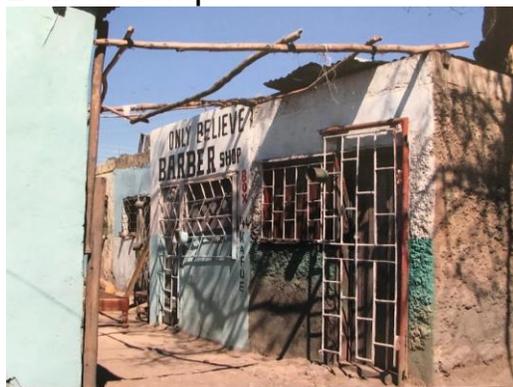
# “Only Believe”

November 25, 2018  
John 18:33-37; Rev 1:4b-8

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In 2005 I visited my native land of Zambia. I was born in Zambia while my parents were there as teaching missionaries for the United Church of Zambia, but I was only 2 when we came home to Canada, so I didn't really remember what the country was like. My husband Alex and I decided to experience it for ourselves.

One of things I found when I visited Zambia, and then later Kenya, is that the African people have tremendous faith. While many are overwhelmed by their poverty, I was overwhelmed by their wealth — their wealth of faith. I couldn't help but see how Canadians, afflicted by affluence, are starved of faith. In Zambia, in spite of the lack of material wealth and possessions their richness of faith is so obvious and it shows up everywhere. I just loved the name of this little Barber shop: “Only Believe Barber Shop”!



What do we believe?

This is the last Sunday before we begin Advent, the journey of waiting and preparing for Christmas. Except that Advent isn't just about waiting and preparing for Christmas — but for the fullness of Christ.

This last Sunday before Advent is liturgically “Christ the King Sunday”.

Before we look forward to the wee baby Jesus in the manger — before we look at the smallness and nearness of God — we pause and remember the fullness of who we believe Jesus is — not just a wee baby, not just a man with tremendous wisdom and kindness, but King of kings and Lord of lords. Last week a friend jokingly posted this picture to my timeline on FaceBook.



It was a joke and kind of cute ... especially the whittle puppy in the manger <3...

But if we don't pause (get it...paws! Sorry I couldn't help myself!)...if we don't stop here for a moment on Christ the King Sunday to see the Transcendent God, then we might get lost seeing cute baby Jesus and miss the whole thing.



The wise men from the east didn't make the long journey to see a sweet newborn baby — there were plenty of those right where they lived. They came to honour a king. They came because they saw the promise and the prophecy in the stars and they believed it, in spite of the surroundings and in spite of the fact that the small figure before them looked nothing like a king. They glimpsed something so

much larger than what meets the eye, and for that they knelt before him and presented precious gifts.

I don't know how many of you have been following some of the United Church news, but I'm guessing most of you have heard of the Atheist minister Gretta Vosper.



3 years ago Toronto Conference began a review of her suitability for ministry. In particular, they wanted to know if she was still in "essential agreement" with the beliefs of our church.

The United Church is not a Doctrinal Church. We don't demand that you as congregation members, or I as a minister, believe an exact set of Doctrines—a prescribed set of beliefs. But in order to be ordained, clergy need to say that they are in "essential agreement" with the church's statements of faith, which include the Twenty Articles of Doctrine in the 1925 Basis of Union, the 1940's Statement of Faith, the New Creed, and the Song of Faith. They are all written at the very beginning of our Manual, so if you are in any doubt about what the United Church believes then you are very welcome to check it out. <https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/manual-2016.pdf>

Rev. Gretta Vosper said she was in essential agreement when she was ordained in this Bay of Quinte Conference, but later her beliefs changed. Even though she has publicly proclaimed that she is an atheist, she still leads (and wants to lead as an ordained minister) a United Church congregation in Scarborough: West Hill United.



When she came out as an atheist, many in her congregation left, but presumably (I don't know her), she must be a pretty good minister in all other aspects because a number of congregation members stayed with her. They don't say the Lord's Prayer or any prayers. They don't read from the Bible or call on any divinity. They don't baptize or celebrate communion. They encourage one another to be good people and live a life of justice and peace.

If you had a doctor who stopped believing in Western medicine, likely they would stop practicing as a doctor. There have been other ministers who stopped believing, but they promptly left the ministry.

Why does Vosper choose to stay in the church? I really don't know. There are lots of atheists in Canada — something like 4 million Canadians proclaim atheism, so there is nothing special about that— and that might be the point. Sceptics point out that without remaining in the church, Vosper would have no story and no spot-light, as well as no pension and no church building. (Our buildings, including this one, belong to the denomination and not to us, so if we decided to leave the UCC we would leave the building behind). Vosper's supporters inside and outside her congregation say she is doing good ministry, so why should she have to leave?

A week or two ago, just before a trial of her suitability was to begin, the United Church put out a very brief statement that said: "*Toronto Conference, the Rev. Gretta Vosper, and West Hill United Church have settled all outstanding issues between them. The Rev. Vosper will remain in ordained ministry at West Hill. We acknowledge the faithful work of all of those who have been involved in the process.*" That's it. That's all it said.

It was a confidential process and we don't know what happened or what was said to settle all issues, so that makes the end result very unsatisfying for those concerned. While I have no idea why they came to this settlement, I suspect it has more to do with legal issues and perhaps with trying to save the church a huge amount of money in the legal fees for something they might not win... but that is just speculation.

But I have to say that *I am very grateful for Gretta Vosper and for this whole controversy*. Not because I agree with her — I don't — but because I have noticed in the past couple of years that people in the United Church are talking more and more about their faith.

In years gone by, no one was interested in talking about Doctrine. I remember our former minister Rev. Dave Steele gathering a group to talk about doctrine, but hardly anyone showed up! I wasn't super surprised. We are wonderful about *walking our faith* — we are great at putting our faith into action and doing good things and making a difference — but we have

traditionally not been so good at *'talking our faith'*. This is the church I've grown up in — a church that does wonderful things, but is uncomfortable talking about faith.

As President of the Bay of Quinte Conference this year, in my travels around the area and going to the General Council this summer, I've seen a real shift. *People are actually talking about their faith in Jesus, and I am convinced it is in response to Rev. Vosper.* And to that I say *hallelujah!* The church cannot survive on doing good things—it will only survive if we go back to our roots of who we are and what we believe. It will only survive if we can see the King of kings in a most unexpected place.

Why should we believe? Well I don't think it's a 'should' at all. When you catch a glimpse of Christ the King — when you catch a glimpse of who Jesus really is and the power to save, it is humbling and incredible. I think we caught a glimpse of the power of Jesus to save last Sunday when Frederick Dryden spoke. All the odds were stacked against him — he had a life of gangs and prison, and likely it would have been a short life. But by the grace and the power of God, what was meant for evil has been transformed into something incredible. We see it around this church a lot too — people who have been saved from addiction and despair, and who now have hope. In huge and in smaller ways so many of you have experienced the saving power of faith in Jesus. I pray that all of you will glimpse it.

I remember a story about a man who was walking by a church one night. The inside of the church was lit up and the man could clearly see people inside jumping all around and acting erratically. To the man standing outside it looked absurd, but from inside it was a different story. Inside there was music — and the people were dancing to the music. The man outside could see the movement, but couldn't hear the music. So it is with people who don't have a faith -- for whatever reason, they can't hear the music that gives us life and makes us dance. We need to tune our ears to the music and we need to find ways to talk about and share that music and invite others in to dance along with us!

I do think that Rev. Vosper should be called to account for how she can be in 'essential agreement' with our faith statements and how she could continue to be ordained to Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care if she is no longer living her call. But I will trust the higher courts of the United Church to do what is right. Personally, I'm more interested in planting seeds than pulling weeds. Far more than focusing on one minister and one small congregation, I want to focus on the King and focus on helping others

to see what I see and hear the music that I hear. That can transform an individual and a community.

If you do recognize and choose to worship this King ... I cannot guarantee that you or the church will have sunshine and roses. I suspect rather the opposite. If the King we follow leads to and through a cross we too may walk towards and into dark places if we choose to follow.

We don't need to be reminded that the darkness exists all around us. After Frederick Dryden spoke at our church last Sunday he spoke at the Rotary Club the next day, and people were blown away by his talk. The timing was perfect. My brother Josh set up this tour early last August, before a gang of youths in Brockville murdered an innocent man. Frederick's message was exactly what this community needed to hear *right now*, and at the heart of his message is the saving power of Jesus. I don't think the timing was a coincidence. I believe it was God-led and God-ordained.

You have your own darkness in your life: your own addictions, physical and mental health issues, relationship heartaches and financial burdens. Bring your worries and your heartache and despair to Jesus. You won't be disappointed. You will find salvation and peace.

Listen to Jesus saying to you, as he did to Jairus who asked for his daughter to be healed: "Do not doubt but only believe". And may you be able to respond like another father in the gospels who was desperate for Jesus' healing touch on his child: "Lord I believe! Help my unbelief."

When we kneel down and worship the one who looks nothing like a king but who is indeed the King of heaven and earth, we will find incredible love and incredible life and healing for our broken hearts and broken world. Thanks be to God.