

## ***What's in the Comma?***

Stephen Van Kuiken  
North Congregational U.C.C.  
Columbus, OH  
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*Jesus Christ... who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried...*  
—The Apostles' Creed

Ancient Witness: Luke 18:18-27

If you're not from the United Church of Christ, you might not know that the denomination has this saying. and the saying is, "God is still speaking," and we use the comma as a symbol of this. And we have this saying on the front of this church along with this comma. And we often refer to a line from the final love letter of Gracie Allen to her husband George Burns: "Never put a period where God has put a comma."

As we look at the Christian story, we see it begins with the Hebrew Scriptures and Judaism, then the coming of Jesus and the New Testament, then the formation of the canon, our Bible, and then the creeds in the Fourth Century. Most of Christianity takes all of this that we've inherited as the end of the development of the Christian story, and puts a period. The end.

This is why the phrase, "God is still speaking" is so radical. Most of Christianity believes that the way God spoke and acted in very special to those early generations, in a way that was qualitatively different from the way God speaks and acts today. But this phrase says, "No, God is still speaking and acting, but in the same way. Every bit as important and substantial that God spoke and acted in those previous generations." The Christian story continues to evolve and change the way it evolved and changed during the time of Moses, during the time of Jesus and the time of the disciples. So we don't put a period at the end of Fourth Century. We put a comma. And you can say that what's in the comma is everything that has happened in the last 1700 years! For example: science! We understand the world a lot differently than previous generations. And we also understand that God doesn't intervene in the scientific world. Many of us see God differently. So the faith, Christianity, is evolving to see God not as an intervening force. Perhaps God is active in a different way.

In that comma you might also see all the people who have been excluded for generations in the church. Gay and lesbian people, excluded from the church. People we dared to think and dream differently who were labeled as "heretics," excluded from the church. There's a lot in that comma.

Harvey Cox, a theologian who taught at Harvard Divinity School, in his book, *The Future of Faith*, talked about three ages of the Christian church. And the first was the Age of Faith, those first four centuries where people were following the teachings of Jesus and were seeking to experience God in their lives. And a lot of people say that is where the revelation of God ended. Period. And Cox said this was followed by the Age of Belief, which lasted all the way up to

now, about 1700 years. And that age is marked by a rigid codification of beliefs that are enforced. And do the focus switched from experiencing God directly to believing in concepts and ideas about God. Because those first four centuries were very, very diverse. And you had a lot of writings that were excluded such as the Gospel of Mary or the Gospel of Thomas.

Biblical scholar, Elaine Pagels, who is still at Princeton Seminary, wrote a book, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. And she describes what was essentially a take-over of Christianity.

She focuses on The Gospel of Thomas, which was one of many “secret gospels” and it was secret because it was squashed. And these writings of the first centuries that showed how diverse and varied early Christianity was, but they were on the losing end of a power struggle. Many of them were destroyed and only survived because monks put them in clay jars to save and preserve them. And many were only recently discovered in the 20th century. So Pagels contrasts The Gospel of Thomas with The Gospel of John, which emerged as the winner. In many of the other Christian writings that were excluded and suppressed, Christians were not seen as *believers* but as *seekers* of God. But Christianity was turned into propositions and theological statements that people believed. It was turned into a cognitive head thing, where you simply give assent. In earlier Christianity, belief was not the goal. And the goal was experience of the Mystery. The goal was to move “beyond belief.” The emphasis was not on *what* to believe but *how* to know.

In our story this morning, a rich ruler asks Jesus what he can do to inherit eternal life—to be saved. Jesus tells him to sell everything and give the money to the poor. The people all say that this was impossible! That’s ridiculous! Who could possibly do that? Jesus said, well it is possible. God can make us generous, courageous, less fearful, less grasping, less anxious. In another place to the same question, Jesus said, “Love God and love your neighbor.” Notice did not say, “Accept me as your Lord and Savior, and then you’ll be saved.” He didn’t say that. He said, “Follow me, and you’ll be saved.” See the difference?

Here’s a quote from a friend, Robin Meyers, a UCC minister, scholar and writer:

*In the Sermon of the Mount, there is not a single word about what to believe, and only words about what to do and how to be. By the time of the Nicene Creed, only three centuries later, there is not a single word in it about what to do and how to be—only words about what to believe.*

It was flipped! So, in 325 CE the Nicene Creed essentially became church law. And it was also at the Nicene Council that the official list of writings for the New Testament was established. So they cut it off. God’s not speaking anymore. Or at least not in the same way. The Apostles’ Creed, perhaps is a little older, but it wasn’t enforced. And a written version emerged later in the Fourth Century. On the cover of your bulletin I put a part of the Apostles’ Creed, and let’s take a look at it together.

Now I want you to notice something. Go back to the part that says that Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary [COMMA] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was

crucified, dead and buried.” So what’s in that comma? Jesus is in that comma—the life, teachings and everything he said! It’s all excluded from the creeds. I sometimes call this the creeds with the empty center. The ancient creeds move from the miraculous conception and birth, and then just skips over to the death of Jesus and miraculous resurrection. But everything in the middle was left out. So what’s hidden in the comma was what Jesus said and what Jesus did. I think that’s pretty important stuff. And that comma that we circled represents the entire life, message and teachings of Jesus that has been excluded in creedal Christianity essentially for the past 1700 years. In the creeds, Jesus’ life and teachings aren’t important. Jesus is only important as a perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins to appease an angry, vengeful God. It’s a different model of God, who needs a blood sacrifice in order to love us. That model has dominated the church for all those centuries. There’s a lot in that comma.

Jesus’ life, actions, teachings. The God that Jesus talks about. It’s all missing. Here are some of those things that I thought about that Jesus taught and modeled that could go in that comma:

1. Debt Forgiveness
2. nonviolence, pacifism, peace
3. a challenge to the Empire and injustice
4. an image of a fair, compassionate Kingdom
5. free healthcare
6. helping the poor and vulnerable
7. helping the immigrants
8. anti-racism and moving beyond tribalism
9. Oneness—all people, all things
10. Boundary crossing
11. God who is Love
12. Not a vengeful, punishing God
13. A God who forgives who calls us to forgive 70 X 7 (infinitely)
14. An awareness of God
15. anti-literalism
16. anti-hypocrisy
17. anti-greed
18. authentic prayer/spirituality
19. self-emptying, *Kenosis*
20. freedom from anxiety, fear and worry, a God who causes fear but one who takes away fear.
21. commitment
22. courage

You know, I’ve talked with many people lately who are feeling a lot of anxiety and stress about this election. Many are feeling tired, worn out and fearful. Chris Isaacs, one of our members, pointed out that a comma, when it’s in a sentence, signifies a pause. And in our faith tradition, a sabbath is a pause. And we need a real, honest-to-goodness sabbath. We need a time of rest, of centering upon God, of focusing upon beauty and goodness. We need a time of quiet and peace. We need to feel a wholeness that lies deep within us.

Jesus spoke to his disciples who were consumed with their own worries, and he implored them to take some time to just be. Look how the birds of the air and the lilies of the field live. They just are. He teaches us to let go of our anxiety and to allow God's presence feed us. Spend some time seeking God's kingdom, which is within us and among us, right under our noses. Breathe.

And finally, whenever we face something that looks like it could be the end, whenever it looks like there's a period, God says, "Wait, that's not all!" It's not the end. It's not the last word. God puts a comma there. And God is going to put a comma after November 5. No matter what might happen, God who love the world into existence, never stops loving us. And so our deepest hope is not that our plans will work out or that we will avoid disaster. No, I'm getting at that deep personal hope that reminds me of that first question of the Heidelberg Catechism that says that our only comfort in life and in death is that we belong to God. This God is a Mystery not known with the mind but is experienced in the heart, and who replaces every period with a comma.

Thanks be to God!