

THREE BEES

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, January 8, 2017

I chose to title this sermon, “Three Bees.” I thought it would be a cute play on words (well, really “letters”).

I found that “three bees” is a popular theme, especially in elementary schools, where it represents three “rules” for success as a young student: Be safe, Be respectful, and Be responsible.

It also plays well as a pop slogan.

Women who are familiar with the cycle of pregnancy may appreciate these three B-words: Bumps, Babies, and Beyond.

It works on t-shirts, and even hot air balloons in parades.

After all that, I thought about changing the title, but I decided it could work for me, too.

The three B-words I want to focus on today are the words that form our church’s motto, or tagline: Believe, Belong, Become.

At the beginning of a new year, we will do well to re-visit the foundations of our church, our reason-for-being, as it is framed in these three words. They are intended to express how we pursue this Christian life and how we invite others to join us.

We arrived at these words by a prayerful, democratic process. I offered some suggestions I had been thinking about, to prime the pump, and asked everyone to offer alternate suggestions. When the list was complete, we sent it out for everyone to see and pray over and vote for their favorite three suggestions. The most popular three were put before the membership for a vote, and they chose “Believe, Belong, Become.”

You’ll see the words printed on my business card and on the church’s letterhead.

Letha created three striking collages, highlighting these words, which hang on the wall of our Library.

But these words only mean something if they describe our actual practice. And they can only describe our practice if we have individually and collectively understood and embraced them.

That's why it's important to revisit them every so often to see what they mean to us and how we are implementing them.

Let's take them one by one...

Believe

First, we invite people to BELIEVE with us.

Now, that is different than asking people to believe LIKE us, or exactly as we do. For the simple reason that it is not necessary that ALL of our convictions be uniform. Eventually, as we walk through life together, we may agree on many things. That's a normal outcome.

Goodness! Have you noticed how many people begin to look like their dogs?

But we're not after look-alikes, or copycats. God has taught us in the Bible that we humans tend to observe and evaluate the outward appearance (of people and things), while God observes and evaluates the heart (the inward ~~condition~~, no, inward lean or direction).

When we incorrectly think that God is looking for a certain condition, we try to learn what it feels like and learn to imitate it. But God isn't looking for something we have manufactured; He's looking for something authentic. Not exactly spontaneous, but, even if schooled or rehearsed, something genuine.

I call it a "lean" or "direction" because it is scarcely static. Just like when riding a bike or driving a car, you can't just set it and forget it; you can only make your way along with innumerable adjustments—for the speed of traffic, for the direction of your destination, for the slope or curve of the road, for the weather. Usually (though some unusual factors can be irritating), you don't feel dissatisfied about it, you just know that driving requires close attention and a multitude of adjustments. That's what driving is!

Living as a Christian also requires close attention and a multitude of adjustments, because the way is not always straight or smooth, or even obvious. It requires a Guide. More than a roadmap, which is helpful when the way is fixed; this is more like traversing mountains and valleys that have no well-worn trails.

Yes, it requires a Guide. It's based on a relationship, not rituals—a relationship of trust. It's based on a relationship, not a code of beliefs—a relationship of faithfulness.

Do you have that relationship with God? Do you trust Him? Are you faithful to Him? That's what we are calling people to.

We don't do it perfectly, and we're not expecting others to do it perfectly (because even God doesn't expect us to do it perfectly). But we're not calling others to anything less or anything else.

We're inviting people to believe.

Believe in what?

First, this: believe that God exists.

Hebrews 11:6 It is impossible to please God without trusting Him. Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that God exists and that He rewards those who sincerely seek Him.

Believe that God exists, no matter how uncertainly. In other words, it's okay to have questions and doubts and uncertainty; those are the very gaps that faith is given to fill. So, if you believe there is a God—if you cannot fathom how the world came to be or is sustained without God—then, come to Him. Seek Him out. Reach out to Him. Trust Him enough to come to Him. Trust that He will reward you for turning in His direction, that He will receive you (not reject you) whenever you bring your most authentic self before Him.

This is one way of describing God's grace: He accepts and receives us just as we are, when we turn to Him sincerely.

Second: believe in Jesus Christ.

Acts 4:12 There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.

Recognize that this open door of grace is specifically given to us through the mediation of Jesus Christ. And yes, His name matters (just like your name matters).

1 John 3:23 And this is God's commandment: We must believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as Jesus commanded us.

If you want to think of the Old and New Testaments in terms of commands, John did a brilliant job of summarizing them in that verse (the Father's commandment and Jesus' commandment).

Put my two points together and you have this: **BELIEVE** in the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

This is the beginning of the life of faith—you cannot begin without this.

This is also the way of the life of faith—any other pursuit is counterfeit and unproductive.

This is also the destination of the life of faith—how amazing is this! You actually arrive at the destination *in the same moment that you start*. The rest of your life is spent deepening that relationship, strengthening your trust, expanding your courage, and multiplying the fruitfulness of your faith in Him.

Belong

Belonging is about what we do *for* our faith and what we do *with* our faith, in relationship with other people.

Many people claim that their faith is a “private matter,” which others may neither share nor judge. In fact, it is a *personal* matter, which no one else can control or defeat, but it is not private in any way. It is to be lived in the light of day, where God and others may acknowledge, question, and approve or criticize it.

The life of faith is a story—your story—about how God’s Story impacts and affects you. It is a message written by the Holy Spirit in your natural life.

2 Corinthians 3:3 *Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you. This “letter” is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the Living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts.*

A letter has an audience and is intended to be read. However, that does not mean it is to be professionally performed (like a television script). This letter is the record of an authentic life—through struggles, failures, victories, sorrows, and joys. Only from such multiple perspectives can a life of faith be recognized. Only in these ways can faith actually be shared.

And faith *is* to be shared. Not lived in isolation, but lived *with* others “who share the same precious faith.” Faith in Jesus is not a solo event, and you are not invited to simply be a spectator, while others “fight the good fight.”

This journey is to be shared, side by side, arm in arm, and on our knees.

Ecclesiastes 4:9 *Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. ¹⁰ If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. ¹¹ Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? ¹² A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.*

This is what we call “fellowship” or “communion.” It is not an event, not a mere ritual; it is the Christian life, the life of faith, the community of believers.

When you choose to follow Jesus Christ, He will place you in a local body of believers and seekers, where you may learn to love others as Jesus has loved you. Where you may learn from their mistakes, as they may learn from yours. Where you may support and encourage one another. Where you may forgive and embrace one another in prayer.

Ephesians 4:31 *Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. ³² Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.*

Everyone needs family like this. In a family there is always potential to hurt and be hurt. But there is also always potential to forgive and make up. And every person who learns those valuable lessons is stronger and happier for it.

Will you let the love of Jesus Christ be your guide for family life—in the home and in the church?

The Lord will make you a place to *belong*—a place to be loved and a place to be useful.

If you’re accustomed to being on the receiving end of that kind of grace, make sure you’re also on the giving end when it’s needed. Take the opportunities that present themselves.

Or, if you’re accustomed to being on the giving end, make sure you allow others to show kindness to you. Let others have the opportunity to be gracious.

Become

John 12:36 *Put your trust in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of the light.*

If you practice your faith (Believe) and practice His love (Belong), you will be changed. The changes Christ makes in our lives are not only at the outset, but the whole journey through. He will change how you see others, and how you see yourself.

2 Corinthians 5:16 *So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! ¹⁷ This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!*

Begun! It is not done yet. The cake is still in the oven. You are no longer who you once were, but you are also not what you will one day become.

Romans 8:28 And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them. ²⁹ For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son, so that His Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And having chosen them, He called them to come to Him. And having called them, He gave them right standing with Himself. And having given them right standing, He gave them His glory.

Believing leads to belonging, and belonging leads to becoming. This is God's plan.

1 John 3:2 Dear friends, we are already God's children, but He has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He really is. ³ And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as He is pure.

Becoming is not just about an inward change. Becoming a "new person," a "child of the light," suggests also corresponding new behaviors, new endeavors, new objectives.

Jesus prayed to His Father, "Just as You sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world" (John 17:18). We have been called to live as Jesus lived: for the glory of God.

If you choose to trust and follow Jesus, no matter what, you will *become* more than you have ever dreamed, inside and out.

You see, the ultimate goal is this: to become like Jesus! It may seem a million miles or light years away, but that's what God is up to. And He is able to do it! We may fight or run from it or we may embrace and pursue it. What will you do?

If you have chosen to embrace Christ, make up your mind that you won't do it alone. Don't just go to church, become the church!