We Call Ourselves Disciples
Matthew 16:13-16
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
November 15, 2026
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

About a month ago nine of us from First Christian Church joined others from across the Christian Church in the Upper Midwest for our annual regional gathering. The theme this year was, “We Call Ourselves Disciples.”

At that event we heard from Alexander Campbell, or at least John Bolen dressed in 1800’s clothing impersonating Campbell who was one of our denominational founders.

We got to listen to Disciples pastor and hymn writer Jim Miller talk about the process of writing the hymn “We Call Ourselves Disciples” which we sang today as our opening hymn.

And we got to talk to each other about our history and the core values we claim.

Next spring we, here at First Christian, will spend more time talking about Disciples identity. After all, whether you have been part of this denomination since birth as I have or whether you are quite new, it never hurts to remember who we are. So, you can look forward to us spending several weeks in the spring after Easter exploring questions of Disciples identity in both worship and Faith Formation.

But, coming home from the regional gathering I was reminded that we don’t have to wait until we have more time, rather it doesn’t hurt to dip our toes in the water of our identity and to spend a little time, even now, remembering who we are.

So, I am curious. When you think of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), what are the first words or phrases that come to mind?

Depending on your history, especially if you are newer to the Disciples or if First Christian in Coralville is your only experience of this denomination, your answers might be things particularly about this congregation. Or, they might be things you have learned more broadly from experiences or knowledge of our denomination as whole.

But for most of us things such as openness, unity, welcome, hospitality, and even home come to mind. Those were words I heard in my small group at the regional gathering.

Now, if we look beyond feelings, we might talk about practices like weekly communion, congregational autonomy, or believer’s baptism. We might talk about the importance of ecumenical relationships or the priesthood of all believers. We might talk about connection with the community and understanding our faith to motivate compassion and justice.

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What's interesting is that the more we learn about the history of the Stone-Campbell movement, the movement from which our denomination grew, what we find is that who we are today continues to be deeply rooted in the core values of our founders.

And one of those values is simply stated in the early Stone-Campbell slogan, "No creed but Christ."

Rooted in the scripture we heard today, which is often referred to as the good confession, our founders believed that the church at large put too many requirements on people, often in the form of belief statements or creeds…requirements that often resulted in separating Christians rather than bringing them together.

And so, our founders strongly believed that we didn't need a long list of belief statements or a detailed theological dissertation around which to gather, but rather that we can be one bound by the simple profession of Jesus.

No creed but Christ - it might be simple, but that does not make it easy.

After all, if we look back at what Paul read for us today, in Matthew's gospel we hear Peter answer Jesus' question about his identity by saying, "You are the Messiah [in some translations, this says "Christ"], the Son of the living God."

Even within that statement, there is much to talk about (just ask those who were at Bible Study a couple weeks ago). There are things we can debate. There are nuances of difference we could spend ages unpacking.

And, one of the beautiful things about the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is that having those conversations is also part of our core values. While our founders didn't demand that we hold everything in common, what they did ask is that we engage both our minds and our hearts in study and conversation, in listening and sharing, in the work of coming to understand and then looking again as we continue to grow and even change our understanding.

And they never believed this to be a solitary activity. Rather study and growth, learning and debate were activities to be shared by people of faith. And they were activities, not motivated by narrowing our answers to one selected set of beliefs, but rather motivated by a desire to continue to grow and understand and open wider the welcome to others who would choose to follow Jesus.

No creed but Christ.

Simple.

But again, not easy.

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Especially not easy when people - throughout time and still today - too often want to define who Jesus is and what it means to follow him based on their own beliefs. Not easy when churches have been built around the power of the pastors and other leaders to expel people from them because they claim a different understanding. Not easy when no creed but Christ isn't only addressing officially sanctioned creeds or even understandings of Jesus, but also is the way that some people's grip on what it means to be Christian is held so tightly that it becomes a de facto creed.

Rev. Mark David Albertson, in a recent reflection about the all too common tendency for people to declare that others are not "real Christians" wrote, "Calling someone's theology wrong is one thing. Calling their faith fraudulent because it does not resemble yours is another" (Rev. Mark David Albertson, Facebook post November 7, 2026).

And the invitation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a denomination rooted in this simple focus on Jesus and a deep commitment to unity, is an invitation to welcome to the table all who desire to come…an invitation to not only welcome them, but to stay at the table through the conversations and even conflicts, in the midst of the things we hold in common and the differences that threaten to push us apart.

Because when we root ourselves in that claim: no creed but Christ, then we realize that this isn't only about how we understand who Jesus is and what we claim about him, but it is also about how we live our lives as his followers.

Again quoting Rev. Albertson, who writes that rather than comparing someone else's Christianity to a set expectation, "I'm more interested in the question I try to ask about my own faith: Does it keep pointing me toward Jesus?" He goes on writing, "And that may be the harder question for all of us. Because perhaps the danger is not that someone else's Christianity is 'counterfeit.' Perhaps the danger is becoming so certain that our version is the only authentic one that we stop recognizing Christ when he shows up outside the boundaries we have drawn" (Rev. Mark David Albertson, Facebook post November 7, 2026).

And so we gather again and again as those who have been drawn together by the life and teachings of Jesus; as those who keep saying that in Jesus we have glimpsed the heart of God; as those who commit each week to continue to do Jesus' work in this world.

We may spend the rest of our lives unpacking words and theological concepts. We may have differing definitions and understandings, different priorities and practices. And we are invited to not only have these, but to wrestle together with them.

And we are invited to do this always asking how our faith, our beliefs, our practices keep pointing us toward Jesus; how our Christianity keeps proclaiming God's love. Amen.

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