

This I believe....

Heather Cotignola-Pickens

Lord, I believe, help me with my unbelief. What do I believe? For me, practice and presence are more guides to my life than belief. My unbelief and questions have allowed me to grow spiritually, through acknowledging that I don't know it all and I cannot figure it all out. This is not easy for me, since I desperately want to have it all figured out--- and I love constructing arguments and can thoroughly convince, at least myself, that I am right (just ask John-Michael).

I am so grateful for this grounding in presence and practice that I learned through my Quaker upbringing—which focused on actions as the main part of faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit rather than doctrine. I need this grounding to keep my love of thinking in check. So, while I do love theology and believe our interpretations deeply matter, they matter due to how they are lived out.

So, what about this practice and presence? I keep coming back to loving my neighbor as myself, loving my enemies, and doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God. That following Jesus means loving people holistically for who they are, not who I want them to be, and not because they agree with me or look like me. That the people that I want to separate myself from the most are where I will find Jesus. And loving my neighbor means fighting against oppression in its many forms and towards justice and equity--- which requires me to find ways to challenge my White, cis-gender, heterosexual, Christian, educated privilege.

That *may* all sound great--- and I am aware that I do not live up to that. So, I live in the tension of imperfect love and the need for grace. That my choices and actions aren't straightforward and there is tension with where I live—and thus who is my neighbor, my professional pursuits and even daily tasks. It's my imperfection, my struggle with how to live this out that leads me to my need for others to live out this call. It's been the times of great loss or grappling with chronic illness that my frameworks do not work anymore that lead me to my interdependence on others---- and it's through these deep connections where I have felt God's love manifested.

Through the hope and comfort I find from God's and others' presence I can begin to understand that my presence and not only my works matter. I find hope in their presence, their love and not a particular practice or belief.

So, I believe in love. In God's love and how I feel it through being present with others and with creation. That loving with others in forms of community is the only way I can attempt to follow Jesus. That my and others presence is love, and that God is in everything. God's love and presence fills in the gaps of my own and others' efforts--- that love, through practice and presence, will endure.