8-2-20 Sermon “I Believe in God”

In the small church in which I grew up we recited the Apostles’ Creed every week in worship. As a child, then, I came to know the words to be able to say them along with my parents and the congregation well before I had any idea what it was we were saying or what these words meant. In fact, I seem to remember that I knew the Creed before I knew the Lord’s Prayer, even though we recited that every week as well. There was something about it’s almost story-like structure that stuck with me.

For lots of reasons today, most churches don’t recite a creed on a regular basis, but use them only when the sacramental liturgy around baptism calls for it, which is how the Apostles’ Creed was originally used. In its original form it was used in a question and answer format as new converts to Christianity prepared for baptism, where the priest or presider would ask, “Do you believe in God?” and the converts would respond, “I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth,” and so on.

For longtime church-goers who were raised on the Creed, you know how easy it is to recite the words in rote fashion without having to think about what it is we're saying, even thinking about other things or mentally composing our grocery list as the words roll off the tongue automatically. In this four week exploration of the Apostles' Creed, we'll give a broad overview of what creeds are and why we have them, we'll touch on the differences between various creeds (there are hundreds of creeds in case you wondered) and we'll consider what the Creed means for us today and how it can be a part of our own faith journey in what by many is considered a post-religion era for much of the post-modern world.

First, what is a creed? Well, the word "creed" comes from the Greek "Credo," which literally means "I believe." But the idea of "believe" in this word is more than the idea of giving mental assent to an idea. Saying "I believe in God" means more than stating "I believe God exists." No, the idea behind "credo" is more closely linked to the idea of "I trust, I promise, or I commit." So, when we speak the opening words of the Creed we are saying

that we place our trust and our lives **in** God, the God in which the Apostle Paul said, "we move and breathe and have our being." And even as the Creed says "**I** believe," this is as much a statement of what the **church** believes and holds true as it is a personal confession of faith.

We don't know exactly when or how the Apostle's Creed came to be like we do with the Nicene Creed, which came about as a result of the Council of Nicaea that met in the early 4th century. There is a beautiful legend attached to the Apostles' Creed that says that on Pentecost, after the Holy Spirit had been poured out on all of those gathered, the Apostle Peter said, "I believe in God, the Father almighty," to which his brother Andrew added, "and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord." The legend continues that the remaining disciples then added their respective lines and that from this the Apostles' Creed was created. There is no proof that this is, in fact, how the Creed originated, but it is a lovely image.

Some push back against the use of creeds, citing a desire to build "a faith of their own," based on their own interpretations and understandings of scripture, tradition and experience. And

that truly is important in developing a personal faith, a personal relationship with and to God. But we must also remember and understand, as I said a moment ago, the creeds were not intended, and should not be used, as litmus tests for right or wrong belief or of the orthodoxy of one's personal beliefs. They are a statement of what is considered orthodox theology of the church at large, even if as individuals we may have doubts or disagreements with some aspect of that orthodoxy. After all, if everyone was in agreement on all aspects of theology we wouldn't have thousands of denominations.

No, the creeds are specific responses to theological conflicts and questions that arose in the early church. You'll note in the printed version of the Creed in the worship folder, for example, that the section of the Apostles' Creed addressing Jesus is considerably longer than those sections dealing with either God or the Holy Spirit. The Apostles' Creed developed in response to what would later be declared the heresy of Marcionism. Marcion was an influential member of the early church who, among other things, held that all things physical or material, including our own

human flesh, were evil and that only spiritual things were good. Marcion held, and tried to convince others of the rightness, the orthodoxy of his belief that the material world was evil and, that being the case, God would never have incarnated "in the flesh," that Jesus only **appeared** to be human but was not really. Along with that, Marcion espoused that the God and Father of Jesus Christ was not the YHWH of the Old Testament, but a completely different God.

So, besides declaring Marcion a heretic and kicking him out of the church, we see how that conflict led to what became the second descriptor of God in the Creed as "maker of heaven and earth." This was the church clarifying for all that the same God of Genesis who created all things is in fact the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

The first descriptor, the Father Almighty, was intended to clarify the relationship between God and Jesus. Language about God as Father in the Creed is not intended to make a doctrinal claim about the gender of God - scripture is clear in multiple places that God is neither male nor female and actually refers to God in and

with feminine descriptors several times. No, the use of "Father" is first of all to describe the relationship Jesus had with God, as Jesus described it in his use of the name "Abba" for God. Some interpretations also suggest that the use of the term, "Father," is also intended to suggest that that is what **all** fathers **should** be, not what or how they are. This brings an aspirational quality to the descriptor, painting God as the "ultimate" father or parent, the ideal or perfect parent. For those who have had an abusive, absent, or otherwise dysfunctional relationship with their human father, the Creed offers this image of God as a substitute, as an alternative vision of what a father could or should be. And of course, it also in some ways reflects the patriarchal nature of the time in which it developed.

Returning to the phrase, "maker of heaven and earth," I think it's also important to explore what the Creed is, and is not saying, about Creation. A broad reading of the Creed shows that it reflects in just a few verses the thousands of verses found in the Bible as a whole. In the Creed we read and retell the story of God's creation of everything that exists, of God's decision to

become one with that creation in and through Jesus Christ, and then of God's sending the Holy Spirit to be with us eternally as God's ongoing presence in and with the world. The Creed is broadly structured - there is nothing here about sin or salvation, nothing about atonement, sacraments, or an after life. In saying that God is the Maker of heaven and earth, the Creed does not dismiss scientific discovery or advocate for a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 and a six day creation story. The Creed is written in such a way that it invites and welcomes our discussion, our doubts, and our questions, as a way to engage the faith and work out our own faith.

With all of this said, as I mentioned before, reciting the Creed is still problematic for some people in the church. In fact, the idea of creeds keeps some people away from the church all together. However, I would invite you, in thinking about the words of the Creed to consider them in comparison to another pledge or promise that many make without reservation, those found in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. Church historian Justo Gonzalez,

making this comparison in his book, *The Apostles' Creed for Today,* writes,

"People recite it at various times as a sign of patriotism, as an indication that they truly stand for the flag and with 'the Republic for which it stands.' Yet, when you stop to think about it, there are statements in that pledge that many who recite it would personally question - or at least interpret in their own particular way. To declare, for instance, that the nation is "indivisible" is to forget the horrors of the Civil War - or perhaps to remember them so vividly that they must be avoided at all costs. In is also to ignore the many racial, political, social, and economic divisions within the country and to ignore the way many exploit and foster such divisions for personal gain. And many who affirm that this indivisible nation lives 'with liberty and justice for all' would question that there is indeed equal justice for all, pointing to the many cases where justice is miscarried, where the innocent suffer, where the guilty go unpunished, where the poor lack basic resources, and so forth.

"In spite of all this," he continues, "we do not take a poll to determine which parts of the Pledge of Allegiance to keep and which to ignore. We do not do this because the pledge is not so much a description of what each citizen as an individual believes as it is a statement of the way the nation sees itself - the way it sees itself, partly in actual fact, and partly as an ideal."[1]

We do not need to silently mouth the parts of the Creed that are problematic for us any more than we need cross our fingers for those parts. Rather, as we spend the next three weeks exploring, allow the Creed to pique your curiosity, to give voice to your questions and your doubts. You stand in a long and glorious tradition of believers and saints who had the same doubts and questions about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit, about the Church, and so many other things but who, in speaking their credo, helped developed the faith tradition we embrace today.

I believe in God the Father Almighty. Maker of heaven and earth. And because I believe, I seek to grow in my relationship

[1] Gonzalez, Justo L., *The Apostles' Creed for Today,* Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2007, pgs 7-8.

with God as Parent, as Father and Mother, and to live into that relationship as best I can, knowing that I will often times fail. And because I believe, I must love and respect this entire creation of which I am part, and in which God has placed me to carry out God's purpose. Ecological concern is not a passing fad, nor is it the possession of one political party or another; it springs out of the very doctrine of creation and out of the love of the Creator. Amen.