

Scripture Readings for May 15th, 2022

1 Corinthians 15:1-8 (NIV)

15 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Mark 12:28-31 (NIV)

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Sermon: “A Controversial Creed”

On Anniversary Sunday it’s obviously appropriate to give thanks to God for this congregation and its enduring witness to the community for 194 years. That’s a remarkable heritage! While we acclaim this church’s founders and their vision, it’s also an opportunity to go even further back to the Church fathers of the 2nd to 4th centuries and celebrate their enduring witness through the development of the early Creeds. So today we begin a new sermon series on “What We Believe and Why” by exploring the Nicene Creed, which we affirmed moments ago. Just like the Lord’s Prayer, we can recite it without absorbing what it says. Others find the Creed unintelligible or confusing. Yet, once we pause to consider each clause, I think we can better appreciate the Creed’s profoundness, value, and relevance for today. I want to try and convince you why we shouldn’t discard this ancient Creed. My hope is that by the end of the series we will all eventually be able to proclaim the Creed with sincerity and intellectual integrity.¹

Let’s begin: What *is* a creed? The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo* which means “*I believe*” and can be pluralized to “we believe.” The Creed is therefore a *profession* of faith and that means it provides a statement of personal and communal *commitment*. Faith language is *not* that of science, with its measurements, analysis, and predictions; rather, faith is the language of confession, bearing witness, and trust. And that practical trust is important, because faith is much more than intellectual assent to a checklist of ideas or principles.² Even so, belief itself is still important. As the writer of Hebrews says: “Whoever would approach God must *believe that he exists* and that he rewards those who seek him.”³ Belief that God exists is a precondition for faith.

The Creed, then, seeks to convey truths about God and creation using language that is *beyond* what we can test or prove. It seeks to express the basic truths concerning human existence: where we come from, why we are here, and where are we going? Given that bold intent, some would say that a Creed is a bit pretentious; it’s certainly a risky thing profess publicly.⁴ It’s risky in that professing it could result in ridicule; but more than that, we not only may *look* like fools – we may *be* fools! That’s because we can’t be absolutely sure our creed is true, but *I believe* it is true *for me* and together as a community of faith we profess *our* joint beliefs. In reciting it, we are proclaiming our *trust* in something we believe though we do not fully understand it.

That being the case, it’s fair to say that the concept of a Creed can be offensive to some because it’s perceived to oppose the use of reason or belittle the thirst for knowledge and facts by claiming instead to be part of a community that defines itself by what it *believes*. Belief in a Creed is therefore seen as a sign of intellectual failure because, as I just mentioned, it claims to trust in statements about reality

¹ Reciting the Creed is done in the spirit of Martin Luther’s famous saying, “Here I stand, God help me, I can do no other.”

² See Jas 2:19.

³ Heb 11:6.

⁴ On that note, while people may debate the meaning and extent of human freewill, believing in and reciting a creed is a genuine choice. Moreover, as individuals within a community, we can understand aspects of Creed differently yet be united.

that *can't* be empirically tested. Creeds then are deemed out of date, conservative, a form of intellectual laziness or psychological weakness - even ignorant. In addition to those secular critics who see adherence to a creed as believing in something improbable, there are Christians – particularly protestants - who mistrust the traditional Creeds because they are *not* found in the Bible. These words, they claim, are *not* those of Jesus or Paul but of a group of men who devised this text for political and philosophical reasons centuries later.

I can appreciate both forms of criticism. Let me respond by saying that I believe *everyone* has a *credo* - a set of beliefs - even if they are not formally articulated. For example, those who advocate for the use of reason in all things ultimately have their *faith* in the capabilities of the human mind.⁵ Nevertheless, even physicists admit that they cannot demonstrate their basic premises but must accept them on trust. In my mind, faith is vitally important⁶ for all forms of knowing and adhering to a set of beliefs doesn't mean having to abandon the use of reason or reject having a healthy dose of skepticism. There's a huge difference between blind faith and a critical faith.

In addition to being a profession of faith, the Creed serves as a *rule* of faith, that means it's the yardstick or measure by which we define the Christian norm. Protestants will perk up at this point and say, the *Bible* is our rule of faith – our canon. I agree; however, one purpose of the Creed is to provide a rule as to *how* we read the Bible, and one obvious emphasis of the Creed is the Trinity. We are to read the Bible through a *trinitarian* lens. And that's not obvious, but it is – if you think about it – *uniquely Christian*. One role of the Creed is therefore to *point* to Scripture – certainly *not* to replace it! Moreover, adhering to the Creed does *not* exhaust the meaning of any given biblical text, but it does provide a framework to understand the Scriptures as a whole.⁷ But note the Creed provides a great deal of freedom and there are many things absent from the Creed that Christians often deem important. For example, the Creed says nothing about the authority of the Bible, nothing about the meaning of the cross, no details concerning salvation, and nothing about the teaching and miracles of Jesus. It wasn't that those things were unimportant to the creators of the Creeds, but they didn't feel those things were *fundamental* to what “we believe” – and that might shock some people. Again, the Creed was never intended to replace Scripture but to shine a light on it.⁸ It creates boundaries, not barriers.

Let's now briefly remind ourselves of the Creed's origins. The book of Deuteronomy contains an ancient Jewish confession of faith known as the *Shema*:⁹ “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. And you

⁵ And it's not obvious that that our minds are as wise – even evolved – to the make such a confident assessment.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin writes, “Both faith and doubt are necessary elements in this adventure [of knowing]. One does not learn anything except by believing something, and—conversely—if one doubts everything one learns nothing. On the other hand, believing everything uncritically is a road to disaster. The faculty of doubt is essential. But . . . doubt always rests on faith and not vice versa” (Newbigin, *Proper Confidence, Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 24–25).

⁷ That framework serves as a boundary to avoid heresy.

⁸ The Creed also prepares us for worship (including Holy Communion and Baptism), hence its recitation, and is useful for instruction (catechism).

⁹ *Shema* comes from the first word which is “hear.”

shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”¹⁰ Notice that it is *communal* commitment of the people of God. In the context of the surrounding polytheistic cultures, it is *exclusive*; there is only *one* God and it is to this singular Creator God that the nation of Israel owes its allegiance. And they are not merely to believe this God exists, but they are to passionately love that God with their whole being. As we heard earlier, Jesus affirms the *Shema* as central to his understanding of God and its practical implications.¹¹ But in light of the resurrection of Jesus, the Christian community felt it was necessary to alter that *Shema* and with it the story of God and God’s people; Paul makes that clear in our other reading this morning. In time, the apostles interpreted the resurrection as the first fruit of a new creation even using language of Jesus being a new or second “Adam,” and God’s people now included non-Jews. This is a very radical belief and it meant that they had to understand the oneness of God to somehow now including the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Paul tells us that one of the church’s earliest Creeds was, simply: “Jesus is *Lord*.”¹² And that’s a powerful claim in that the word “Lord” is the Greek word for the Old Testament name of God, YHWH – the name God gave Moses at the burning bush. The risen and ascended Jesus has been given God’s full authority and so in some mysterious-but-unspecified sense Jesus is God. We will talk more about that in later weeks. The New Testament also claims that Jesus is *the Christ*, God’s Anointed One, or the Messiah.¹³ Proclaiming Jesus is the Messiah was not necessarily challenging Jewish traditions but linking that title to Jesus’ resurrection *was* problematic and got Peter in trouble with the Jewish religious leaders.¹⁴ In the book of Acts we’re also told Jesus’ followers were given the nickname “Christians,” which obviously implies we are the “Messiah’s people.”¹⁵

Before the Gospels were written, Paul reminds the Corinthian church the basis of their faith, saying: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.”¹⁶ And you will recognize that phrase is in the Creed along with mention of the *Shema* and Jesus as both Lord and Christ. In other words, the words of the Creed have their origin within the New Testament texts, pulled from various places, adapted, edited to address timely needs but their roots are truly biblical we will see more of that in the weeks to come.

Given those origins, the later developments of the creed were not radical new inventions by the 3rd and 4th century church, rather those authors were expressing their Christian convictions by going *back* to its earliest roots. Their ongoing experience of the risen Jesus demanded a new telling of the biblical story, and a proper understanding of that story needed to be defined and defended from those who would

¹⁰ Deut 6:4-5. (“One Lord” can be translated “the Lord alone.”) See also Exod 20:2–3.

¹¹ See: Mark 12:29-31, Rom 3:29; 1 Cor 8:4-6; Jas 2:19.

¹² 1 Cor 12: 3; Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11.

¹³ See, for example, Mark 8:29; Matt 16:16.

¹⁴ See Peter’s first sermon in Acts 2:32-33, 36; 3:1-26; 4:1-12.

¹⁵ Acts 11:26.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 15:3-4.

want to distort it.¹⁷ Even in the early 2nd century, various wordings were being developed for use within the life of the church. For example, Ignatius of Antioch exhorts his readers: “Be deaf therefore, whenever anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who is of the stock of David, who is of Mary, who was truly born, ate, and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of the beings of heaven, of earth, and the underworld, who was also truly raised from the dead...” You’ll notice that wording from about 115 AD is echoed two centuries later in the Nicene Creed. Amongst other things this stresses the humanity of Jesus as one who truly suffered as we suffer. And there are other sentences in the middle of the 2nd century where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are mentioned together and so the notion of Trinity is being formulated and discussed.

One of the earliest creeds is commonly thought to be the “Apostles Creed,” which is in fact a misnomer because the apostles didn’t write it! It’s a shorter creed than the Nicene Creed and it was probably originally a series of questions that was asked a person who was about to be baptized. Our baptismal liturgy today asks similar questions. The version we recite was actually finalized in around the 7th century and is really a *Roman* Creed rather than one that was universally accepted across the whole church. The Nicene Creed, on the other hand, has similar features and was originally formulated at the First Church Council of Nicaea in 325 and later *reaffirmed* and *extended* at the Second Church Council in 381 in Constantinople. It’s that final version that we called the Nicene Creed, even though it’s longer than the original version. It articulates the whole Church’s experience and summarizes the story by which we claim to be the people of the one God, shaped by our experience of the risen Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit. And it has proved enduring in that Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestants *all* affirm the Nicene Creed. This Creed of course is very different from the simple “Jesus is Lord,” but its roots are still firmly embedded in Scripture.

In conclusion, the Creed does not propose a philosophy of life but tells a story with characters and a plot. It’s a story about God and the world, about God’s investment in humans and their future. The fact that Christian belief is embodied in the story says more than any philosophy could about the Christian commitment to the world - visible and invisible - as created by God. It starts with creation and ends in the future life. But at the heart of the story is the birth, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the son of God, who shared our humanity and transformed it by that sharing. It’s a story unlike any other. Where do we come from? We come from God - we are his creation. Who are we? We are God’s children adopted into his family through Jesus the Messiah. Where are we going? We believe we’re going to share in the life of God forever. That’s what we profess *by faith*. In reciting this creed we *choose* to live our lives in adherence to *these* claims about reality and we reject alternative narratives. It is this creed that has shaped and guided the practices of the Christian community throughout the ages, and still continues today on our anniversary Sunday. Amen. Let us pray.

¹⁷ Such as Marcion (ca. 85-160).