

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

February 17, 2013

First Sunday in Lent

Hebrews 11:1-7

Credo: I Believe

In ancient times, hundreds of Christians, under interrogation, refused to bow down to the empire's gods, stood their ground and declared, "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth," and were executed for saying so. They had not long before left their old life behind and risked everything by choosing Christianity.

In those days, new converts were instructed in the faith for months, during which time they fasted, abstained from entertainment and sex, and were prayed over diligently by the church elders. An all-night prayer vigil culminated at dawn on Easter when the converts waded out into a pool of water and were asked; "Do you believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth? Do you believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord?"

Then after they were baptized, they were anointed with oil, dressed in a white robe, and given a drink of milk and honey, powerful symbols of their new life in Christ.

When we say the Apostles' Creed, we step into a long, steady river, the great two-thousand year story of believers, missionaries, and martyrs.

When we say, "I believe in God," we become part of something bigger than ourselves. We acknowledge that our faith is more than just the thoughts of our own making or our own private feelings about ultimate matters. Our faith is IN something outside ourselves – something with content - something, in fact, which is old.

Originally the Creed was designed for worship and that is where it is most frequently experienced today.

A little history:

The Apostle's Creed though NOT found in the Bible, can be traced back to the earliest Christians just after the Bible was written (within 100 years). In the middle of the 2nd C., a creed very similar to the Apostles' Creed was used in Rome and written down by a historian of the time. As well there were a couple other creeds which we find in ancient writings of the 3rd and 4th centuries which are similar in structure and content.

They were all used in question form, during worship, at the time of baptism. And they are all Trinitarian, meaning that there were 3 questions – one for each person of the trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And so the three answers are typically referred to as the 3 articles of the Creed. (When the Confirmation Class makes their statement of faith in the form of questions and answers, the first 3 are for each person of the Trinity as well.)

You'll notice that in the largest section/article – Jesus – that the chronology follows properly, but that it skips over his whole life, going right from his birth to his death. This is because the Creed was not intended to be a complete summary of Christ's life or the Christian faith.

The Creeds were written to emphasize certain points of doctrine or beliefs that were under attack during a particular time. And the original purpose of most ancient creeds was to affirm faith in the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and to strengthen believers against views that at the time seemed the greatest threats to the Christian faith.

Another creed written in the year 325, the Nicene Creed, came to be written because the leading scholars of the time could not agree about Jesus, and how he could be fully God and fully human at the same time. Some thought that his “God-nature” entered his body at his baptism. Others were drawing huge distinctions between our earthly, human nature, and our souls / spirits. So the Nicene Creed has a lot to say about who Jesus is, and where he came from.

Later in the 9th century Christians in the West wanted to add a phrase to the Nicene Creed and another argument ensued. And those who wanted to avoid the conflict started using the Apostles' Creed more – giving it a little boost in popularity. The Nicene Creed survived in both versions, but the Apostles' Creed had supplanted the Nicene Creed mostly in the west.

Then in the Reformation another 700 years later (16th Century) the Apostles' Creed became the one most used in those emerging churches. Both Creeds are used world-wide still today and other Creeds have been written, but none have become as popular. The Apostles' Creed is most widely used in Protestant Churches, though some will use both.

Remember that the Creed was written as a teaching tool, to share the riches of the faith and to bring people to greater understanding and devotion to God. It was not designed as a brick wall of belief to keep people out. In fact there is a “blessed spareness” in it – pushing no theory of sin, no theory of the meaning of Jesus death, no prescription of how the church should be structured. There is room in the Creed for many kinds of Christians and, of course, for our questions.

And in this way the Creed helps us grow into our convictions. To believe without the Creed would be like baking without a measuring cup or building furniture without a ruler. It helps us discover what we believe and what we don't believe. It helps us figure out who we are and how to live.

Because faith is not believing impossible things. Faith is what we give our heart to.

In 1859, the greatest tightrope walker in the world was a man named Charles Blondin. On June 30, 1859 he became the first man in history to walk on a tightrope across Niagara Falls. Over 25,000 people gathered to watch him walk 1,100 feet suspended on a tiny rope 160 feet above the raging waters. He worked without a net or safety harness of any kind. The slightest slip would prove fatal. When he safely reached the Canadian side of the Falls, the crowd burst into a mighty roar.

In the days that followed he would walk across the Falls many times. Once he walked across on stilts, another time he took a chair and a stove with him and sat down midway across, cooked an omelet and ate it. Once he carried his manager across riding piggyback.

And once he pushed a wheelbarrow across loaded with 350 pounds of cement. On one occasion he asked the cheering spectators if they thought he could push a man across sitting in a wheelbarrow. A mighty roar of approval rose from the crowd. Spying a man cheering loudly, he

asked, “Sir, do you think I could safely carry you across in this wheelbarrow?” “Yes, of course.” “Get in,” the Great Blondin replied with a smile. The man refused.

It’s one thing to believe a man can walk across by himself. It’s another thing to believe he could safely carry you across. But it’s something else entirely to get into the wheelbarrow yourself.

Believing in God is like getting into the wheelbarrow. It’s entrusting all that you are to all that he is. It’s not the amount of faith that matters; it’s the object of faith that makes all the difference.

“I believe” is not the same as saying “I feel” or “I want” or “I think,” but rather, “God is like THIS” and I attach myself to this God. This is the framework within in which I will process all of life.

It’s also good to remember that the Creed came about through questions. And in this way it invites our questions and our doubts. It gives us a conversation partner and list of topics to discuss together. While it is rather short, it is not simple or simplistic. Its statements are loaded with meanings and interpretations.

As we make our way through it, it will force us to expand our faith, not shrink it down to a few sentences. Though it is almost the length of an elevator speech – and in this way it is a handy outline of the faith. One author (Nicholas Lash) says, “What the scriptures say at length, the Creed says briefly.”

It is a quick summary of the sixty-six books of the Bible, a bird’s-eye view of the high points of the story spanning thousands of years. The Creed helps us get our arms around the big story. It is almost a story itself – moving chronologically and in order.

God is first, then God creates; then God sends Jesus, who is born, dies, and is raised; then the Holy Spirit dawns on the Church and its life.

The Creed hints at a beautiful thought – that there is such a thing as truth, that genuine truth is not an imposition forced upon us, but rather it is an open door through which we walk out into the marvelous space of life with God. We find our personal fulfillment when we discover our place in the broader work of God.

There is a story about a young Orthodox priest who told his spiritual adviser that he had difficulties with some of the statements of the Creed.

“Recite it anyhow,” the adviser replied.

The young man came back after a few days, again declaring that he could not in good conscience claim to believe all that the creed said.

“Recite it anyhow,” the older man insisted.

This went on for several weeks, until finally, exasperated and confused, the young priest asked, “Why do you insist I repeat the Creed when you know there are some phrases in it I don’t really believe?”

To which the elderly adviser replied; “Because it is not your creed. It is the Creed of the church. When you recite it you are not directly saying what you believe. You are declaring what the church believes, and has believed for thousands of years. And you are declaring yourself part of that church, no matter whether you believe every point of doctrine or not.”

The same is true for each one of us.

When we say the Apostles' Creed, we are placing ourselves in a long line of Christians throughout the centuries who have found their identity in the same gospel and the same community of believers we're in right now.

So let's rise and declare together this summary of the faith in which we stand:

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,*

*and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he arose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father
almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.*

Amen.

That, my friends is what Christians get to believe.

Amen.