

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

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Fourth Sunday in Lent

Creed 4

...and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord...

The Apostles' Creed is like an ancient road map of the Christian faith, written by the church in the first couple hundred years after Jesus died. Jesus himself did not put out formal doctrinal statements, either about himself, the world, God, or anything else. Rather he lived a life, taught in metaphors and parables, and told his disciples that they ought to pay attention.

It has been the Church, throughout history, that has come to some sort of common understanding of what all of that means, writing that into creeds and doctrines to teach those who come into the Christian faith.

How beautiful it is that here we are – two thousand years later – doing just what they did – asking “what do these stories and truths mean?”

It's been easy going so far; we started big with the first line, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” And this belief actually unites us with at least two other religions: Judaism and Islam.

But as soon as we move to the second line, “and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,” we begin to move into the territory of what sets us apart as Christians. Remember that the initial followers of Jesus were Jews, as was Jesus himself. But as the disciples of Jesus began to define who they really believed Jesus to be, there was no longer room for them within Judaism and the faith of Jews and the faith of Christians pulled apart.

No one questions THAT Jesus lived when and where he did. There are plenty of history books written that make reference to him at that time. It gets interesting when we consider the impact he has had on the world, which is tremendously odd, given his life and death. Think about it...the calendar of today's civilized world is oriented around the birth of Jesus.

But Jesus was not born to power and influence, as was the Buddha. Jesus did not write a large religious volume to pass along, like Mohammed did. Jesus was not a king of a nation with a tradition of divine kingship like the Pharaohs of Egypt or the Emperors of Japan.

Jesus was the son of a carpenter. We know his family was poor because of the sacrifice they bring to the Temple when Jesus was circumcised. They bring a pair of doves, the sacrifice prescribed for the poor who cannot afford sheep or goats or bulls.

We know almost nothing of his life before age 30 at which time he becomes a sensation, working miracles and becoming a populist teacher wandering the hillsides of Palestine without any real place to call home. After just three years of teaching and miracles, he has made the religious authorities so mad that they arrange for his execution as a criminal, at which point his disciples either go into hiding or return to their former lives.

There is no reason for a human being with Jesus' biography to be at the foundation of Christianity as we know it today. Maybe he could have been at the center of a sect that endured for 50 or a hundred years. But 2,000 years as one of the major religions of the world and all of time oriented around him?

There's obviously more to it – more to Jesus – than history.

First, we believe that Jesus was the Messiah that the Jews had been expecting. Christ is not Jesus' last name. "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah," both which mean in English, "anointed one." It was the practice of the ancient Israelite prophets to anoint the kings of Israel, indicating God's choice of this person for special work on behalf of the nation.

The prophets declared, and the Jews expected that there would be a very special anointed one...Messiah with a capital M...who would rise up from their midst and be a savior for them in the way that Moses had been. Especially since Israel experienced almost constant occupation by foreign powers, they looked to God to send a liberator, a leader like Moses, a King like David, who would beat off their enemies and bring peace, prosperity and self-rule.

The Jews were not looking for God in the flesh...the Messiah they were expecting was human, not divine. It was the function that was important...to free the people.

For a brief time, the Jews in 1st century Palestine thought Jesus was it. But when he refused to rally an insurgency to oust the Romans and ended up being executed without any sort of struggle whatsoever, they abandoned both that idea and Jesus. But Christians believe that Jesus was in fact that Messiah, but that the freedom he brought was not political. Whenever you say "Jesus Christ," you express that belief that Jesus was the Messiah so long-expected by the Jews.

But there's more! Christians have also believed from the very beginning that Jesus had a relationship to God that, at the very least, was different from that of ordinary human beings, while maintaining that that Jesus was at the same time a human being like everybody else.

Where we ended up was with the belief that Jesus was two things at once...fully human and fully God. Whenever someone tried to emphasize one side and diminish the other, they were condemned as heretics. The Church stood firm. Both were to remain in tension together...Jesus as a man, Jesus as God. Both at once.

This is where it makes a difference – what we believe about Jesus – and why holding on to this paradox is important.

If Jesus truly is God, that says some pretty incredible things about the God who also created heaven and earth. If Jesus is God, then God has actual experiential knowledge of what my life is like. We all know how hollow it sounds when someone says, "I know what you're going through," when what we are going through has never been part of their experience.

If Jesus is God, then God knows from experience what it is like to be poor, to be hungry, to be persecuted. God knows what mockery, humiliation, and abandonment are about, and knows what it feels like to die. God knows what it feels like when a close friend betrays you. God also knows about the joy and fun of weddings and festivals, about the disciplines of study and prayer and what it takes to stick with them. God knows about family and friends and how it feels when they criticize you or fall asleep during something important, and how much you miss them when they die.

Believing that Jesus actually is God is the single most important thing responsible for the personal and intimate connection I feel to God. God doesn't just relate to us from a high and almighty position. God knows what it's like on the ground, where we live. Jesus as merely a good man makes me revere and honor Jesus, much as I do Ghandi, Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Jesus as God turns my love and adoration toward God, which...all through Jesus' life and teachings...is what he is trying to do.

If Jesus the man is not also God, then God remains beyond my reach as a being and I have no way to understand Him. If Jesus is God, I still only know God in limited form, but I at least have that. I at least have enough information about what God values and expects to go on in my daily life.

Jesus is a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the nature of God.

If we indeed serve a God who is so insanely in love with human beings that He would show up on earth and endure the kind of life that Jesus did in order to bring us into relationship, then God will stop short of nothing to bring absolutely everybody into the fold.

The life of Jesus shows me that God will go to any and all lengths to help us know God. The shepherd will leave the ninety and nine and go in search of the one. But if Jesus is not God, then I have no indication that God will try to meet me or anybody where we are. I will have to find my way to God, and I may be successful or I may not.

If Jesus was just a great teacher and a mighty prophet, then we are all lost, because God is far from us, and who knows whether what we do will be acceptable in God's sight. But if Jesus is God, then God goes to eat dinner with precisely those people who think He would never come close, and God forgives even those we think are beyond forgiving.

This is who we call Lord. Do you realize how radical it is to say Jesus is Lord? Because if Jesus is Lord, then no one else is.

For the first Christians this was a powerful and dangerous statement. You see the emperor was Lord and so to say that Jesus was Lord, was to say that Caesar was NOT.

Similarly for us. If Jesus is Lord, then my allegiance is to him. All the other claims on my life are subject to him. And I take this seriously – all the competing demands, relationships and loyalties come after this, whether family or nation. I pay close attention to who defines me, who tells me what is important, and how I should spend my time and my energy and my money.

Frankly, I feel much safer, wiser and well off, with Jesus Christ as my Lord and the church as my true home.

That's what we're saying when we declare our faith in Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord.

So let's stand and say the creed....

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 rose 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.

And that, my friends is what Christians get to believe.