

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: Whoever Has Seen Jesus Has Seen the Father
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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore Ohio
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Acts 7:55-60, John 14:1-14

We are still in the season of Easter. This is fifth Sunday of Easter. Maybe, like the disciples, we are still trying to figure out what this business of the resurrection of Jesus is all about. Maybe we are not sure what to think about Jesus himself. Maybe this sermon will be a help for all of us who are confused.

Several years ago, when I was pastoring a church in Day's Ferry, Maine, my colleague in charge of Children's Education and I went to a local restaurant, the Taste o' Maine, for lunch after Sunday worship. Upon arriving at Taste o' Maine we were invited, the weather being pleasant, to lunch on the deck behind the restaurant.

We went to the deck and were seated at the only empty table, one next to the outer railing. Adjacent to our table was one with six or seven people, one of whom, a man, seemed to be delivering a LOUD and BOMBASTIC monologue that the entire deck could not avoid hearing.

The man's voice could not be avoided. I learned later that he had been pontificating for a good hour before my colleague and I arrived.

Unfortunately, his subject was the ridiculousness of Christian faith. Well, that's ok, I thought to myself. Everyone has their own opinion about religious beliefs.

However, it quickly became clear that the man did not know what he was talking about. His knowledge of our faith was poor. Moreover, the reasoning and scholarship he cited in support of his opinions were the worst. My colleague, Janet, and I squirmed as we overheard his words and cringed at his lack of clear thinking.

Every five- or ten-minutes Janet would lean over to me and say, "I've got to say something." Not wishing to cause a scene, I said, "No, no, just ignore him."

We tried to enjoy our conversation, and the good food served by the restaurant. Our lunch lasted about one hour, by which time the other guests and the waitresses had endured the uninvited speech of our dining table neighbor for about two hours.

As we were being given the bill, the man announced that the Nicene Creed was clearly a political document, dictated by the Roman Emperor to the Councils of Bishops who adopted it. Knowing my history of the Christian church, I knew this to be an outrageous distortion of the facts. The man said, "Only a troglodyte Christian would believe such a Creed." (Troglodyte means one

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who lives in a cave, i.e., a primitive cave dweller with little knowledge and less intellectual ability.)

I heard myself say, out loud, in response, “Sir, I am a troglodyte, and you are full of [baloney].” Except that I did not use the word “baloney.”

I expected that the diners on the deck would be made uncomfortable by my words ... feet would shuffle ... eyes would avert themselves from mine ... people would try to pretend nothing had happened.

Instead, to my astonishment, everyone dining on the deck stood up and gave me a standing ovation! Including the waitresses! Even Janet! Good grief!!!

So, of course, I spent the next ten or fifteen minutes visiting with each table, inviting them to worship with us at Day’s Ferry!

So, today, I am going to preach about the Nicene Creed. It might just help us if we are confused about Jesus and about resurrection.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Church, our predecessors who merged to form the UCC, were always a little skeptical of creeds. They did not want the creeds to be a requirement for becoming a Christian. Our founders were so insistent about basing our faith life entirely on the scriptures that they did not want anything else, like creeds, getting in the way.

UCCers want to preserve freedom of conscience for all believers. They wanted members of our church to covenant with one another to struggle with the scriptures and follow God’s will for our lives as best we can discern that. They did not want to require the faithful to sign onto a long list of specific beliefs, some of which we might accept, some we might be skeptical about, and some we would just as soon do without.

But we never dispensed with the creeds altogether. Reformation churches came up with new creeds. And, in fact, the UCC states in the preamble to our Constitution that we claim “as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers.” The Nicene Creed is one of those ancient creeds we claim as part of our own faith life together.

One of the values brought to us by the Nicene Creed is that it is a good short-hand guide to at least a portion of the scriptures. It points us back to God’s word which tells us about how to be faithful to God. Our scripture readings this morning are an example of that.

But first, I ask you to turn to the single sheet of paper found in your pew. The words of the Nicene Creed are printed there. I want us to read it out loud together not because I think you have to believe every word of it, just to give us a reference point for the rest of the sermon.

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Reading the Creed together:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic [meaning “universal”] and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Nicene Creed is also known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It was the consensus of ecumenical councils in Nicea, 325 A. D., and Constantinople, 381 A. D. One reason for doubting that the Roman Emperor dictated the Creed to the church is that it was developed only after a century of dispute and theological back and forth.

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The creed was a response to the "Arian" movement, which challenged the church's teaching that Christ was both fully human and fully divine. Arians emphasized the humanity of Christ, and therefore, believed he was "subordinate" to the Father. But the faith proclaimed in Constantinople was in a Christ who was both, and therefore "of one being" with the Father. This creed is recited in the Sunday worship of the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. Many Lutheran and Reformed congregations also use the creed when they celebrate Holy Communion.

Let me be clear that I agree with the proposition that the scriptures are the touchstone of what we in the UCC believe. Again, quoting from the Preamble to the UCC Constitution, "The United Church of Christ ... looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world."

So, can we find support in the scriptures we read this morning for at least parts of the Nicene Creed? Let's focus on the relationship between Jesus and God the Father since that was a major impetus for the development of the Creed in the fourth century.

Look again at the story of Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles. We did not read the speech that Stephen made to the Council in the Temple. But it must have been strong stuff to cause all those folks to drag him completely outside Jerusalem to stone him.

Quoting portions of that speech as reported in Act 7:51-53: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it." OUCH!!

Stephen identified Jesus as the "Righteous One" prophesied by Isaiah. Earlier Stephen had professed that Jesus was the true Temple. After naming the members of the Council as murderers of Jesus and faithless keepers of the Law, it is small wonder that the members of the Council were furious at Stephen.

Pay attention to Stephen's words at the end of his stoning, "While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Astounding!! Stephen was praying to Jesus! Not only was he praying to Jesus, but he was also asking Jesus to forgive the people who were stoning him!

To whom do we pray? God. From whom do we seek forgiveness? God. Clearly, Stephen did not distinguish between God and Jesus. He had seen the two of them standing together in the heavenly throne room ... he believed that praying to Jesus was no different from praying to God.

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Remember what Jesus himself says in the Gospel according to John: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”

Jesus and the Father are one ... in the words of Jesus as reported by John.

Over time the church took these scriptures and others like them and formulated the profession of belief that is the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.

Quite a list of the ways in which Jesus and God are the same. All developed from Scriptures. The Nicene Creed was developed from the scriptures. The Creed leads us back to the scriptures.

Despite what you might hear from skeptics, the Creed was not a creation of the Roman Emperor nor the result of internecine church politics. I believe that God’s Holy Spirit was at work in developing the Creed.

We are not Christians because we recite the Creed. We are not Christians because we profess to believe the propositions in the Creed. We are Christians because Jesus redeemed us, because we are in a personal and collective relationship with Jesus, and because we try to do what he directs us to do.

But the Creed is a good, if short-hand guide to what we believe about our relationship with the Godhead. It is based on scriptures and leads us back to the scriptures, the very Word of God.

Let us pray: Dearest God, our brother Ralph Ellison wrote “When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.” Our brother from ancient times, Stephen, was one of the first seven Deacons. He discovered who he was, and he was thereby freed to be who God wanted him to be. The world thought it was the end of his life, but his death was only the beginning. Thank you for his witness to the truth of our Savior, Jesus the Christ. Thank you for his words in the scriptures. Thank you for preserving the scriptures so that we may know the truth of his life and martyrdom.

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We do not seek martyrdom ... we are just some of your people who are trying our best to do what is good and true and just. Help us on our way and keep the truth of the scriptures, whether in the Bible or summarized in the church's ancient creeds, ever before us as a guide and comfort.

Amen.