

Sermon
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
19th Sunday after Pentecost
September 30, 2018

Old Testament Lesson

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 28:16-20 NRSV

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

I Believe: Taking Faith into the World

We have been going through a pretty thorough discussion of the Apostles’ Creed for the past three Sundays. We did that for a purpose, not because it is mysterious, which it is, but in a different way than a spooky story in a graveyard in a coastal city. But, it easily takes us into areas we rarely think about, like life after death, which can be useful to us. The main reason that we have taken it up is to help us define **who and what we are**: to look into our heritage, which reaches back to the ancient worship of the Hebrews and their covenant with God; to the necessity to **worship together**, which was something that the early church understood from their Jewish founders; to articulate the things that you and I really do believe in our **faith and worship**; and, to help us identify some areas of faith **where we struggle** or truly question, which is of potential **benefit** for all of us.

Now, we are at the end of the sermon series. I see some of you rejoicing quietly saying, “Yes!” Others of you are catching this for the first time and thinking, “What did I get into?” Regardless, it is time to wrap up our study of this **historic confession** of the Christian faith: the **Apostles’ Creed**. So, I will pick up where we left off last week as we mentioned the declaration about God’s Spirit:

“I believe in the Holy Ghost....”

This introduces a reality for you and me which interconnects all believers: **God’s Spirit** makes possible all that we do in worship, in prayer, in devotion, and in service. And, it introduces the next areas of concern which are addressed in the latter portion of the Apostles’ Creed: **the Church**, which means the **interconnectedness** of all believers; the forgiveness of our inherent **sinful nature**; the concept of **resurrection**; and our existence that goes beyond **our death**, which is the end of our human existence. So, let us look at these in more detail.

As Christians, we believe in this third part of the Trinity, **God's Spirit**, which was not mentioned in the first few lines of the Apostles' Creed which named **God the Father** and the Son, **Jesus Christ**. However, this particular Affirmation of Faith doesn't let us dwell on this very long, unlike the **Nicene Creed**, which uses several lines describing the attributes of God's Spirit. It probably sounds familiar:

“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.”

Apparently, the folks that put together the **Apostles' Creed** wanted to reduce the verbiage they inherited from the **Council of Nicea**, since the Nicene Creed is as much a defense of **theology and doctrine** as it is a statement of faith.

Now, one sticky point in this phrase of the Apostles' Creed is the term, “**Holy Ghost**.” Some question using such a term. I understand this, but the reality is that there is not much to gain in trying to distinguish between Holy Ghost and the equally valid term: the **Holy Spirit**. In modern British and American culture, we place a more secular filter of supernatural and somewhat “unholy” associations with the word “ghost.” But, you will find that these two words, **Holy Ghost** and **Holy Spirit**, are nearly interchangeable in English **liturgies**, the words we use in worship. This harks back to the popular English translation of the Bible, the King James Version, where the Old English word *gast*, which meant *spirit*, served as the forerunner of the English word, “ghost.” (Both of these derive from the German word, *geist*.) Otherwise, we are dwelling in the area of **pneumatology**, or the study of the Spirit of God: a rather deep area best left for scholars and people inclined to dwell on such things. So, we should conclude that the phrase, “I believe in the Holy Ghost,” is pretty packed with meaning.

In fact, **God's Spirit**, as sent by God and foretold by Jesus Christ, did produce the phrase that follows it:

“...the holy catholic church....”

Now, that is another potentially loaded phrase. But, this one is pretty straightforward. At one time, there was one **Church** (Note the capital “C.”), but it is more complicated than that. In the first 100-150 years that followed the life, death, and resurrection of **Jesus Christ**, there were at least three and, perhaps, four to six categories of **church communities** in existence. First of all, there was the “**church of the apostles**” in Jerusalem. According to the description in the first few chapters of the *Acts of the Apostles* in the New Testament, these Jewish believers in Jesus Christ worshiped at the **temple**, but also believed in Jesus as the **Messiah**. They prayed and worshiped in their homes regularly, along with the temple worship and celebrations. They kept the Hebraic **laws of Moses**. They shared common property and food. They did look after their fellow believers, cared for widows and orphans, regularly read and proclaimed the Hebrew scriptures, and interpreted them in light of the teachings of **Jesus of Nazareth**, whom they proclaimed as **the Messiah**.

At the same time, Paul was establishing churches with mixed **congregations of Jews and Gentiles**, who were Romans and Greeks in cities in Asia Minor and Greece. Eventually, churches were established in Africa and Italy, as well. Christianity was **spreading spontaneously** by word-of-mouth and through one-on-one ministry, and they met for worship and prayer in **house-churches**. All of this is described in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the letters of Paul. In addition, there were **rural churches** which popped up all over Palestine and Asia Minor. Scholars believe that these were less connected to one another than the **church in Jerusalem** or the churches founded by Paul. These more isolated, rural congregations tended to follow either the model in Jerusalem or the model of compromise recommended by Paul.

In addition, if you read the Letters of John (*1 John, 2 John, 3 John*) and the *Gospel of John*, something else was going on. The writer, or writers, of these scriptures described a **community** of believers. The persons in these particular communities seemed to have a **discipline** of living together. Perhaps, they were living separately from society? There is precedent for this: A hundred years before Christ, **the Essene Jews** in Judea and Palestine fell out with the temple rulers in Jerusalem and went **into the desert** to live and await the coming of **the Messiah**. Many scholars believe that this was the type of community that produced **John the Baptist** and his special ministry, which served as a forerunner, or **harbinger**, for Jesus of Nazareth.

AoS, we can see that **Christianity was growing fast** when the Roman emperor Constantine made Christianity the **official religion** of the Roman Empire. It seems that Constantine saw the Christian leadership as useful in enforcing the administration of most of the Roman Empire. Over time, the **birth and death records** were kept by the church. They **settled disputes** among their members. Very quickly, they were given room in the administrative offices: the **basilicas** in all the major towns. Soon, these public buildings became **centers of worship**. At the same time that the Church was gaining greater **acceptance** among their Roman rulers, and there were many different streams of thought and leadership within the church. As a result, there was a lot of inside bickering over **theology and doctrine** by the middle of the 3rd century, so the **Council of Nicea** was given the task of consolidating this. They produced the **Nicene Creed**, which helped a lot.

Of course, much more happened over time. The **Great Schism** occurred about 1100 CE, resulting in a church in the West (Europe), which used **Latin** in all of its services and gave honor to the **bishop of Rome** for leadership; and, the churches in the East were more loosely organized and centered on **Constantinople** (now known as Istanbul in modern Turkey). The **Eastern churches** used **Greek** in all of their worship, as many of them still do. We call these churches **Orthodox**. After another 400 years came the **Reformation** of the Roman Church with Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and many others redirecting the faith away from its Roman authority and **reconnecting the people** with scripture as **God's Word**. So, it is not surprising that today things are pretty split up and, certainly, are not united as **the body of Christ**.

Over time, with all this shuffling and “slicing and dicing” some congregations and denominations bristle over these words: “**holy catholic church**,” thinking of the Roman Catholic Church. However, in this context, or situation, the phrase, “church catholic,” literally means, “church universal.” But, I believe that you and I are smart enough to see through the mist surrounding these words, “**holy catholic (universal) church**” and focus on the **tradition** that we inherit as believers in the **church of Jesus Christ**. So, with that in mind we continue using the **Apostles’ Creed** as our **proclamation of faith** each Sunday in worship as we honor our **church history** and tradition. In doing so, we include some **older language**. Fortunately, or unfortunately, today we are less connected to many of these key phrases.

There is another very useful aspect to this universal designation, as well. The best summary of it is in our *Book of Order*, part of our *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*. The reality and **role of the church** is at the every beginning under the heading “Foundations of the Church.” This means that the existence and purpose of the church is not the singleminded will of a few **church leaders**, or a given pastor, in any community of faith. In fact, the purpose and **actions** of a congregation are not determined solely by its leadership, no matter what title we give them: Session, diaconate, board, or whatever. We, as the church catholic and the body of Christ, are guided by **God’s Spirit**. We are called, and led, by Jesus Christ for **service to God**. That sounds pretty **universal** to me. And, that, my friends, is the **church catholic**.

And, remarkably, it ties us to the next phrase:

“...the communion of saints...”

Through the church catholic (again, universal), we are tied to **all** who have ever **believed in Jesus Christ** as Lord and Savior. This includes the **living**, those who will **follow us** in faith in the future, and those who have gone before us. All believers are **united** through the **power of Christ**. It also directs us back to the power and **sovereignty** of Almighty God, which we glimpsed in our Old Testament lesson in the *Book of Daniel*. The writer of *1 John* points us to this, as well.

We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:3 NRSV

The **apostle Paul** dealt with this in his dealings with those early congregations. His writings make reference to our being **united in Christ** and our having **eternal life**.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free— and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

1 Corinthians 12:12-14 NRSV

Through Paul, God is telling us that through our **unity in Christ**, we keep looking toward the **future** with **God** the Father and Creator and with Christ, our **Risen Lord**.

Well, without skipping a beat, the **Apostles' Creed** zips us along to another topic that takes up the **life** of the church:

“...the forgiveness of sins...”

Our sins are forgiven with **our confession** and by **God's acceptance** of us. This was a major position of the **Reformers**, who looked to scripture and concluded that **forgiveness** rests with **God alone**. They disagreed with the Roman church on assigning so many special “powers” exclusively to the clergy. For Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and others, this was not justified, despite the traditions of ordination on which Rome insisted. Instead, we are a **priesthood of all believers**.

This is why we **confess our sins** to God and to one another. It is important that we keep in mind that in the **Presbyterian** church we believe that **God alone** forgives us, and that there are no actions or works that will produce that forgiveness. All that is required is a penitent heart, admitting that we have sinned; and, through our belief in Jesus Christ **we are forgiven**. This is **God's grace** at work in the world, and it a principle **foundation** for us as Presbyterians.

Now, the next phrase we encounter in the **Apostles' Creed** was of great concern from the beginning of the church:

“...the resurrection of the body...”

A key to understanding this phrase hinges on this: We believe that when we die, we will transition into a **new existence**. Our physical bodies will likely not be reproduced; instead, we will take on “heavenly bodies,” as Paul explains it:

There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.
So it is with the resurrection of the dead.

1 Corinthians 15:40-42a NRSV

With these careful phrases, Paul was preparing the **hearts and minds** of the faithful in the church in Corinth. We will be **resurrected**, but the form of it, like the stars, is beyond our knowing.

Of course, closely related to resurrection is the concept, and doctrine, of “life after death.” That is the subject of the last phrase in the **Apostles' Creed**:

“...and the life everlasting.”

These few words point us to our **life in Christ**; and, they proclaim boldly that it will **never end**. This jumps back to the “communion of saints,” as well. Again, the apostle Paul gives us guidance:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed....

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?”

Where, O death, is your sting?”

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:54c-55, 57 NRSV

These are familiar words, often used in funeral and memorial services around the world. They contain **beauty and truth**. They sustain us, support us, and give us **confidence** in the future. They reflect the absolute **love of God** for us: **Salvation** and everlasting life are ours, through Jesus Christ.

And, then we come to the **last word** in the Apostles' Creed:

“Amen.”

This single word marks the **conclusion** of prayers, hymns, sermons, and as it turns out—affirmations of faith. Literally translated from the original **Hebrew**, this means, **“So be it.”** In English, it often is translated as **“Truly.”** But, when placed at the end of a statement, or a creed, it is more related to its original Hebrew word, which also means, **“May it always be so.”** This is the final plea and **request** of the Apostles' Creed and each one of us as we proclaim it. It also marks **the end** of the Apostles' Creed. However, it is **not the end** of our story, **our lives**, or **our witness**. In fact, it is just **the beginning**.

Allow me to explain. We use the **Apostles' Creed** as an affirmation of our faith which follows the **Proclamation of God's Word**. It is certainly familiar to us who worship here regularly. The joining of our voices together to proclaim our faith precedes **the offering** of our resources and our lives. This proclamation of the people and their offering precede the **sealing of God's Word** with the sacraments, typically the Lord's supper, or **Eucharist**. And then, we sing a **hymn** of praise, prior to our **benediction** and **blessing**. All of that is leading to one of the most important parts of the Sunday worship experience: we are **sent out** into the world to **perform God's work**. Literally, we are the **hands and feet** of Christ. Our New Testament scripture today states it clearly:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.
Matthew 28:19-20a NRSV

Go, baptize, teach, and obey. These are all **verbs of action**. Taken together with the Apostles' Creed, we now have a purpose, and we have the basic **understanding**, or the “Why?”, for doing the **work of the church**. The “who” and “how” of that service in the world is left to us, **guided** by God's Spirit and **called by Christ** himself.

As we leave this time together, we carry **our faith** with us: those things that we believe. We must understand that being a **community of faith** is only part of who and what we are as the church. It is a portion, but **not the total sum**, of our **Christian experience**. Indeed, the process of being the church includes the **relationships** we establish, especially those outside of our community of faith!

This accurately reflects the **ministry of Jesus** when he began **calling disciples** and followers. Jesus intentionally formed a community for discussing, learning about, and **expanding** his ministry. He wanted them to have a **common experience**. And, very likely it ended right there for many who followed Jesus of Nazareth around the hills of Galilee (*Matthew* 8:18-22). However, the life of **the disciples** became much tougher shortly after Jesus was resurrected. The *Acts of the Apostles* and the letters of Paul list the challenges for the disciples after **God's Spirit poured out** upon those gathered in Jerusalem at **Pentecost**. That is when the **work of the church** began in earnest. That labor **continues** to us, and through us, today.

With this in mind, we have to ask ourselves: “Am I being called **to serve** in some new way? While I cannot provide any immediate answer for this, I can point you to a remarkable resource. You may recall this scripture from the *Gospel of Matthew*:

A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Matthew 20:19-20 NRSV

In other words, “Friend, this ain’t easy!” The truth through the ages is that the church, like its believers, has always faced one challenge after another. But, there is **no reason to fear**. We boldly face the future, and we do so **with God**. That is the underlying message of the **Apostles’ Creed**. In affirming our faith, we can state what we know and **believe**. It is worth knowing, and it will take us where **God is calling** us to serve. And, thanks to our **affirmation** of our faith, we remain strong in our faith.

And, it is the **Apostles’ Creed** that reminds us that we live out each day **confident of our future** in the **love of God** in Jesus Christ.

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