

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Fathers Day  
June 21, 2009

**Sermon Series – Credo: Living Faith.**  
***I Believe in God the Father...***

I can't imagine a better Father's Day present  
than the one we've just witnessed this morning  
in the baptism of Alexander Michael Haas.  
Alex with his Father, Mike with his son, and (Mike's father looking on)  
and all of us gathered in the presence  
and under the loving gaze of our Heavenly Father  
and Jesus Christ, his Only Son, our Lord.

What most of you probably don't know  
is that way back in January,  
Chris, in an attempt to plan ahead for family travel plans,  
had already scheduled Alex's baptism for May 24.  
But as first babies often do, Alex had his own plans  
and arrived nine long days late.  
In the waiting, Chris and Mike decided to reschedule the baptism,  
and as this is the only Sunday in June that I'll actually be here,  
they chose Father's Day.

But truthfully, I think God's hand was at work in the scheduling,  
since this is also the first day of our summer sermon series  
on the Apostles' Creed,  
and there is no better way to introduce such a series  
than in standing and saying the Creed together  
during the Sacrament of Baptism.

In case you haven't ever noticed,  
every Sunday when we recite the Creed,  
I walk over there and stand behind the Baptismal Font.  
That's not just because I'm looking for variety,  
or trying to wake you up after the sermon;  
it's because the Font and the Creed refer to one another.

And because of that,  
there is no better time to start a sermon series on the Apostles' Creed  
than on the day we baptize a child of God  
into the community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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Did you ever wonder where the Apostles' Creed came from?  
Or did you just assume, as many do, that it came from...well...  
the Apostles!?

There's an old legend,  
passed down and embellished over the centuries  
that on the very Day of Pentecost,  
when the Spirit gave the apostles the gift of speaking in all tongues,  
that the Spirit also gave them the 12 affirmations of the Creed.

**Peter** said, "I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth..."  
Then **Andrew** said, "And in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord..."  
Then **James**, "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary..."  
...and so on, to all 12 disciples, until the Creed was completely revealed.

This is a fun little story,  
but one that doesn't really add up, or fit with the evidence.  
If this had been the case,  
it seems odd that it wouldn't have been told  
in the second chapter of Acts,  
along with the other amazing things that happened on Pentecost,  
which are thoroughly and colorfully related.

What historians have actually pieced together  
is that the Apostles' Creed was a liturgical formula  
the church had begun developing by the end of the first century  
as part of the baptismal rite.

The Creed was one of two traditions  
that were "handed over" to those who were about to be baptized  
(and here we are speaking of the baptism of adults).  
The words were handed over and would then be "handed back"  
on the day of their baptism.  
The other tradition handed over was the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father.  
In fact, the very word "tradition" comes from the Latin *traditio*,  
which means "to hand over."  
The Creed was handed over two weeks before baptism,  
and the Lord's Prayer, one week before.

In those days, it was forbidden to write these down;  
the words were to be learned by heart –  
no cheat sheets, like the ones we have today.  
The reason for this prohibition was explained by Augustine.  
These words were to be memorized and recited  
because they were to be inscribed on the heart;  
they were to be a personal expression of faith,  
and not the mere recitation of some external authority.

Augustine reported that sometimes, during baptism,  
in the emotion of the moment,  
candidates would have trouble remembering the words  
and that he would have to  
“prompt them in a kindly and pastoral way.”

Once these words were recited,  
they were then proclaimed again in a question and answer format,  
just as the candidates were immersed into the water.  
They would be asked,  
“Do you believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth.”  
And on responding “I do,” they would be immersed.  
Then, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his Only Son our Lord,”  
with a response and a second immersion.  
And “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit in the holy church?”  
with response and third immersion.  
So these three main affirmations,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the holy church,  
are the oldest articles of the creed.

The Creed and the Lord’s prayer were so associated with Baptism,  
that Augustine taught that  
as believers recite these words each day,  
it is as if we undergo a daily re-baptism.

As the years went on in the early church,  
other articles were added to the first three.  
Sort of like the Bill of Rights  
which were amended to the US Constitution,  
these affirmations were added later, gradually, as the need arose,  
to clarify the faith in the face of various challenges  
that confronted the church.

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And, over the centuries of church history that have ensued,  
the challenges to Christian faith have not abated.

We Presbyterians are known as a confessional church,  
because we are guided by a whole *book* of confessions  
which were written over time to address particular challenges  
the church has faced.

And the first document in that book is this one, the oldest of the creeds,  
the Apostles' Creed.

One challenge for the community of Christ today  
is that believers who have been reciting the Creed all or most of their lives  
sometimes find it to be a bit rote, a bit of a dull necessity.

Many of us would admit to droning through its words  
with a sort of worn out regularity  
in which moments of inspiration are few and far between  
if not entirely absent.

For one thing, we no longer live in an oral culture, but a visual one.  
Worship services in America that seem to attract and keep large crowds  
may be better described as "worshi-tainment" than liturgy.  
I've even heard some of these worship experiences referred to as  
"Six Flags over Jesus" – I guess because everyone raises their hands  
like they're headed over the top of a roller coaster.

But remember, the word liturgy means "the work of the people"  
not the "entertainment" of the people,  
or the "emotional highs" of the people,  
or the "stimulation" of the people.

That's why we Protestants call it a worship "service;"  
it is our service to God, the service of worship.

But what really is the value of repeating these words  
week in and week out?

Theologian Emil Brunner says there is  
very little accomplished in simply speaking the words,  
and very little more achieved by merely believing them.

"Nothing is truly accomplished," Brunner writes,  
"by regarding all that is said in the Bible or in the creed as true.  
True Christian faith is not 'to believe something,'  
but to trust and obey the One who speaks to us in the Bible  
and through the creed, with our whole heart."<sup>1</sup>

Knowing or having convictions about the truth means nothing

unless that knowledge and conviction leads to action,  
to a lived response, a life committed to God.  
And the key word here is that little word "in."  
It makes all the difference.  
I believe *"in"* God.  
You see, it's not enough just to believe certain things *about* God.  
The Christian faith is to believe *in* God, to put our trust *in* God.  
This little word "in" establishes a relationship between  
the believer and the living God.  
These are not dead words when spoken by a living human being,  
but words that establish a living relationship  
with the living God who is truly present and at work in the world.

The words themselves are not magic.  
Think about it:  
no one begins in the Christian life by reciting the Creed  
as if by some hocus-pocus.  
Those early believers didn't risk their lives and undergo a long candidacy  
because they liked a certain set of words.  
No – rather, something profound, something transforming  
had happened to them.  
The Creed comes along later  
to help them approach that mystery,  
to begin to make sense that profound experience for them.

As Augustine tells it,  
*first* he grew to love God, and *then* began to ask,  
"What do I love when I love my God?"  
From that kind of clarifying question, there arises the Creed.

Karl Barth has said  
"This [phrase] 'I believe'  
is a meeting with One who is not man but God,  
the Father, Son and Holy Spirit ...  
And what interests me is not *my faith*  
but [the One] in whom I believe."

The Apostles' Creed is not about pointing out our own right belief,  
but about establishing and sustaining a living relationship  
with God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.  
It is not about having all the right answers,  
but about beginning and keeping on with a lifelong conversation.

"There is a beautiful Jewish parable

about two rabbis sitting in a park arguing  
about a passage of the Torah.  
They've been arguing about it for years  
and can never come to an agreement.  
God is so tired of their contending  
that finally God parts the sky, comes down and says,  
"You guys have been fighting for years.  
I will now tell you what the passage means."  
And in a rare moment of unity, the two rabbis turn to God and say,  
"What right have you to come down here  
and tell us what it means?  
Go away and let us argue." ii

Now it seems odd to think of speaking to God in this way,  
except that God doesn't do this sort of thing,  
which is, I think, the point of the parable.  
We are not in relationship with a God who  
comes down and clears everything up.  
We are in relationship with a God who is hidden until he reveals himself,  
but even in hiddenness,  
a God who acts in mysterious, profound, powerful,  
and transforming ways in our lives.  
And you and I and the church universal  
will spend the rest of our lives and the rest of history  
trying to sort out what that means.

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That something, that transformational, life-changing something,  
that God does,  
is revealed beautifully  
in the parable of the Prodigal Son and his loving Father.

That something has also happened to you,  
maybe recently,  
maybe so long ago now that you've lost touch with the experience.  
But it's that something  
that has you here this morning instead of home reading the paper  
home sleeping in, having a leisurely cup of coffee.

You have found yourself wandering in life,  
or feeling lost, or utterly alone.  
Perhaps you have done something stupid, something out of character,  
something with dire or painful consequences.

You've made a choice that in hindsight  
was about the dumbest thing you could possibly have done.  
Or perhaps you feel yourself the victim of other people's choices;  
your life made miserable by injustice, foolishness, evil.

If that has ever been your experience,  
then you know where you belong in this story of the prodigal son,  
the elder, responsible brother,  
and the loving, patient, and ever-merciful father,  
who seeks the best for all his children.

When his younger son's ingratitude leads him to a rash departure,  
the father lets him go his own way.  
Surely the Father's heart is broken,  
as he remembers his son in tender infancy and childhood.  
But he knows that the son must be free to choose or to reject  
the father's love, and his rightful place in the family.  
So the father lets him go his own way – knowing the turmoil it will cause.

But when he sees his son return,  
there is not judgment, nor wrath poured out,  
nor even an I-told-you-so...  
rather, there is mercy poured out,  
and celebration, and forgiveness, and unity restored.

This is the image Jesus gives us of our heavenly Father.  
This is Jesus' first image for us in knowing God.  
It is not so much the power, or the majesty, or the exalted glory  
of God, as real as all these are,

but the tender mercy of God, the steadfast love and faithfulness  
that Jesus wants to be our first thought of God.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God  
and God abides in them.

This is the ultimate reason for the Creed.  
That we may know the love of God which sets us free,  
free to know, free to choose, free to wander, free to fail miserably,  
and always free to return to the One who knows and love us best.

"Love is the only place to start" when speaking of God (David Bailey).

As we consider the Creed,  
we will go on to explore God's power and authority,  
which are also aspects of God's Fatherhood,  
particularly next week in Jonathan's sermon  
on God as the Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth.

But in all theological reflection, in all proclamation about God,  
in all living of life, and in every statement of truth,  
our Source and our End  
is the love of God our Heavenly Father.

In that assurance, I wish you all a Happy Father's Day.

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<sup>i</sup> Emily Brunner, *I Believe in the Living God: Sermons on the Apostles' Creed* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 12-13.

<sup>ii</sup> "Seeds of Doubt," and interview with Ikon's Peter Rollins in *The Christian Century*, June 2, 2009, p. 22.