

## **One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church**

Last spring when we had an evening series on The Creeds, someone expressed disappointment that I wasn't going to explain what the Creeds actually mean. This faithful churchgoer says the Nicene Creed every Sunday yet struggles to understand it. I suspect he wasn't so concerned about the first two parts of the Creed. The first simply acknowledges that God is the Creator and maker of all things. I realize that some people have trouble hearing God spoken of as Father, in part because God really is beyond gender, encompassing both male and female as the book of Genesis tells us. But I don't think that was on the mind of person who spoke to me.

The second part of the Creed is pretty straightforward as well. It summarizes the Gospel life of Jesus. Again, there are those who have trouble believing some parts of it, but what we are asked to believe is pretty clear. Jesus is the Son of God and the same as God (true God or very God, depending on the version). Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven. He will return again in glory and judgment. Usually it's the Virgin birth and the resurrection that become sticking points for people. Still, it's faith in them that is the issue, not what they actually mean.

The third part of the Nicene Creed is where we find more complicated ideas. This was the last part of the Creed to be hashed out. When the Council of Nicaea ended its work, in fact, all that this section said was, "We believe in the Holy Spirit." It took a later Council to add the rest. Of all of the phrases that now follow the Holy Spirit, one of the thorniest is in the middle of the paragraph: "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church." No commas, just four adjectives strung together: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Just what does that all mean?

Today's Gospel reading gives us some insight into that sentence. As Gospels often do, today's passage offends our twenty-first century sensitivities. If you were listening closely you should have bristled. It starts out okay. If someone in the church sins against you, have a conversation with them. Don't tell your priest or discuss it in the parking lot with your friends. Instead, talk directly with the person involved.

But then it goes on. If a one-on-one conversation doesn't work, go back with a couple of other people to be witnesses. And if that doesn't work, tell the whole church, and if the person still refuses to listen, treat them like an outsider. This is where we rebel. There are some religious groups that reject those who don't follow their rules – the Amish and Jehovah's Witnesses come to mind – but I've never encountered it within the Episcopal Church. We don't tell people with whom we disagree to leave.

The original Gospel text in Greek turns out to be more ambiguous than our current translation shows. Older versions translate literally, "If your brother sins." In the New Testament, "brother" is used for a fellow church member as well as a blood relation, so "a member of the church" is a satisfactory substitution. But some of the best manuscripts omit "against you." Was that phrase added later, or was it omitted by a copyist? Is this about sinning in general, or sinning against a specific individual? An argument can be made either way. We simply don't know. And that small ambiguity, I think, can lead us into a better understanding of the Nicene Creed.

Why should we believe that the Church is holy? Because we follow the Gospel and throw out sinners? Hardly. We are all sinners saved by the grace of God. I've heard people say that the church is full of hypocrites who say one thing and do another. But hypocrisy is a human trait, not a Christian one. Everyone falls short of the ideals they espouse. No one consistently acts the way they would like to act. At least in the church we admit that and seek forgiveness for it. The preacher can exhort everyone to love others and respect the dignity of every human being all seven days of the week and not just Sunday. No, church *members* are not holy. But we aspire to be so. We come together each week to hear how we might travel a little further down that road toward becoming holy. We want to be clothed with the holiness of Christ.

The Church is certainly not one. In this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of Martin Luther's posting his 95 theses on a church door, our divisions are especially apparent. Luther was not the cause of those divisions, however; they began at least five centuries before him when the Latin- and Greek-speaking churches split and went their own way. Jesus knew that humans have a way of insisting that they are right and others are wrong. That's why he prayed in the Gospel of John that all may be one, even as he and the Father are one. As with being holy, it's a goal, a hope, a prayer, if not a reality.

The word "Catholic" always gives people trouble. That's especially true in the Rite I version of the Creed, where it is capitalized. I've also heard people say that the Church of England preserved the true Catholic faith when the *Roman* Catholic Church went off track. I'd rather not go there. I prefer the small-c "catholic" in the Rite II version of the Creed, because that clearly means the Church universal. Christianity is a world religion, and like it or not, at its heart is the belief that all should turn to Christ. There is no relativism in Christianity, just as there is no relativism in any of the other world religions. Each makes a universal claim to truth, which is why there is often conflict between religions. For my part, I believe that Jesus Christ is God's clearest self-revelation of who God is, and so Christianity is the best route to truth. That's why I'm a Christian.

The fourth description of the Church, that it is apostolic, means that it is sent. When Jesus lived on this earth he taught his disciples. They watched him work and learned from him about God. Then he sent them out to heal and proclaim the good news of God. We, too, are sent out into a world that is desperate for a word of hope and of life, of healing in the midst of natural and human-caused disasters. It is not enough to simply gather here for an hour once a week. We have to go out. Fortunately, Jesus does not ask us to do it alone; we do it together. That is why he promised to be among even two or three who gather in his name.

Today we begin our program year. There will be multiple opportunities to learn about Jesus and our faith. Each week we will gather as a community to worship God and to experience the presence of Jesus in our midst. We come together as one, confess the sins that keep us from being holy, join with other Christians throughout the world, and receive what we need to be sent out into our weekday worlds. Like us, the church is on a journey, a road toward God. It is not perfect, and neither are we. Yet we have that goal toward which we strive, the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Seeing that goal, we are able to say: we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

[Pentecost 14: Matthew 18:15-20.]