

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
31<sup>st</sup> March 2019  
Philippians 2:1-13

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*Seeking Divinity*

**H**ave you ever heard the phrase, “it doesn’t make one iota of difference”? It comes from a debate about 300 years into the Christian tradition that nearly split the church in two over the Greek letter iota. And it all had to do with the divinity of Jesus.

If you look in the front of your hymnals, before any of the hymns start, on page 34, you’ll see the Nicene Creed. It was a statement of faith hammered out at the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 325 and 381 CE and has

been recited by Christian churches around the world probably every single Sunday since then.

If you look in the second paragraph, on the seventh line down, you’ll see the phrase “of one Being with the Father.” The older English translation puts it as “being of one substance with the Father.”

If you look at that creed in the Greek, you’ll see the word *homoousios*. The prefix “homo” as you know, means “same” and “ousios” means substance. But there’s another prefix in Greek that’s

related to “homo” except it adds the letter “i” at the end, “i” being the Greek letter iota. Where “homo” means same, “homoi” means similar.

And the debate that nearly split the church was over whether Jesus was homoousios with God, being made of the same substance as God, or whether Jesus was homoiousios with God, or made of a similar substance. The iota was, of course, the only differing letter between those two words. And it all came down to whether or not Jesus was the same as God or similar to God.

It may seem like an esoteric disagreement over which to split a church, but recognize that what was actually being debated here was whether or not Jesus was actually God.

It’s a claim that differentiated Christians from the other Abrahamic faiths of

Judaism and Islam. Neither Muslims nor Jews suggested that Jesus did not exist. Both traditions celebrate Jesus as a teacher with unique insights into God, and the Qur’an names his as a prophet like Moses and Muhammad.

It’s also quite likely that at least some early Christians also regarded Jesus as a prophet rather than a divine being “of the same substance as God.” If you look at the epistle of James, a book that Martin Luther called “the epistle of straw” and proposed throwing out of the Bible, James never refers to the divinity of Jesus. Instead, he focuses entirely on practice--on emulating the kinds of actions that Jesus embodied, like loving your neighbor and being charitable.

So what does it mean to talk about the divinity of Jesus? Was Jesus made of the same substance as God? I mentioned a few weeks back

in my sermon on Deconstructing God that I don't think that God is a Being, nor do I think that God has a being. Rather, I understand God as being. Maybe another way to put it is to say that God is not a person, place or thing that acts in love, but that God IS love. When we experience love, we are experiencing God. And if God is not a being, but is being, then perhaps a way to talk about the divinity of Jesus is to reflect on how he was in touch with being, how he was connected through love to other people and to creation in a unique way.

When we talked about virgin birth stories last week. I mentioned that I don't think Jesus needed something like a virgin birth story to make him special. In fact, one of the likely reasons that virgin birth stories about Jesus started circulating was

because Caesar Augustus also claimed divine lineage through a virgin birth. Supernatural miracles are another one of those things used to suggest Jesus was divine. But look back to Moses' call story in Exodus. Moses performs miracles that are matched by Pharaoh's priests. But neither Pharaoh's priests nor Moses himself were considered to be of the same substance as God.

Beyond that, Paul, the earliest New Testament writer, doesn't ever mention a virgin birth or miracles. Mark was the earliest gospel, and he also never mentions a virgin birth. I won't say he doesn't ever describe miracles, but if you read his gospel, miracles don't really seem to be a focus for Mark either. They're just something that happens along the way.

So there was clearly

something else that led Paul and Mark and other early Christians to connect Jesus with God in a unique way.

And both Paul and Mark lean into the image of Jesus as one who breaks down all the boundaries and barriers by which we human beings separate ourselves from one another. Jesus demonstrated the power of God in overcoming fears and divisions, seeing beyond barriers. In Jesus' ministry the divisions between Jew and Gentile, Jew and Samaritan, male and female, Israel and Judah, bound and free, rich and poor, and life and death all faded away. Jesus ministered to all of humanity and dismissed no one as unworthy of God's love.

Paul even talks about the power of God at work in Jesus through his acts of reconciliation. If God is the power of life, the passion of love, the Ground of Being

that draws all lives into a new humanity, then Jesus lived his life in a way that demonstrated that to others and even died proclaiming that same divine love for even those who put him to death.

So I do believe Jesus was divine, but not because of miracles or a virgin birth. I believe he was divine because he was in touch with the true nature of God. I believe he was divine because he saw God in other people, even in creation, and he acted not as though he alone were divine, but he acted as though everyone he encountered was divine, everyone he encountered bore the image of God. And because of that, he loved, just as God is love. He made the idea of God as love, God as life and being, he made that God visible to others by embodying that which is holy.

That, to me, is what

makes Jesus divine. But it is also what makes following Jesus a lot more unsettling and, quite honestly, a lot more meaningful to me. Because I don't have any interest in following Jesus simply because he did some really cool stuff thousands of years ago. And frankly, I don't really think Jesus would care about whether or not anyone believed whether or not he did really cool stuff. Simply saying we believe in something doesn't make the world a better place. It doesn't bring the kingdom of God any closer to reality. And Jesus didn't spend his ministry going around talking about what he believed. In fact, he frustrated the crap out of his disciples by refusing to talk theology but instead calling them to action.

That does not mean that what we believe is irrelevant. It's not. Because it was Jesus'

belief that God dwelled within everyone and everything that motivated his actions. Which is another way of saying that I think it's far less important whether or not we think Jesus was divine than it is whether or not we can see those around us as divine.

Jesus knew and he discovered within himself that he was not only connected to the creative force of the universe, the unified field, or the matrix of all matter as physicist Max Planck called it, but he realized that he was that creative force, and that all of creation was, in a literal sense, divine.

Jesus recognized that every person without exception is divine. Every animal, every tree, and every star. If everything in the universe is formless energy, and we are all connected by that energy, and if we are made up of that energy, and if that

energy is the force we call God, then how could we be anything but God?

So it turns out that this is part of the Nicene Creed that I can affirm with confidence. Yes. Jesus was of the same substance as God. He was, because we all are. We all have divinity within us. Recognizing that, and living as though every encounter we have is an interaction with the divine, that is that way Jesus walked, and the path he invites us to follow. Amen.



