

I am the fourth installment of our five-part series on the Nicene Creed. We have seen that the Nicene Creed, written in 325 at the council of Nicaea, and later updated in Constantinople in 381, has been with us for a long time.

Back in the day, Christianity was a brand new religion, and it was spreading like wildfire throughout the societies around the eastern Mediterranean, and even into Rome, the center of the world. What did it all mean? This group of people heard this and drew their conclusions. That group of people heard something else and drew another set of conclusions. Who *was* Jesus, and what was his relationship to God? What did his life mean? What *was* Christianity anyway? It was sort of like the struggle between Betamax and VHS: the field was wide open, all ideas vying for market share.

The apostle Paul wrote a lot of letters and did his best to codify what it meant to believe that Jesus was the Christ, the chosen one, the messiah, the very son of God. In the first chapter of his letters to the early Christians in Corinth, Greece, he says, "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you," He goes on to say that some believers follow the interpretations of Paul, some the teachings of Apollos, some follow the ideas of Cephas, and so forth. It was a mess. Unless Christianity could become one thing, soon it would be so fractured it would be no thing.

There wasn't one piece of paper that said, "This is what a Christian believes." So, way back when in 325 AD the new Roman emperor Constantine convened in Nicaea, Turkey, a council of priests, bishops, and other such high muckety-mucks of the new church, and said, in effect: "Let's get our act together." Thus was born the Nicene Creed.

That Nicene Creed had three distinct parts. The first has to do with God, the second with Jesus, and the third with the Holy Spirit.

Father Perry described Part One: we believe in one God, timeless, limitless, almighty and forever. You may recall that Father Perry reminded us that God is not a being; God IS being. God is not an object; God is the subject. God is persuasive, not coercive, and God works in us through self-revelation. Perhaps the more we know ourselves, the more we know God, because we are reflections of God.

Father David brought us Part Two of the Creed. Part Two defines Jesus as the only son of God, eternal with God, of one being with God. Part Two also gives us a brief outline of the life of Jesus, from being of Mary, to rising from the death of crucifixion and ascending into heaven. He will come again as a judge, and his

kingdom will have no end. Father David reminded us of the concept of Christ as the Logos, a Greek word meaning Logic. Theologically, Logos is the Word of God, or the principle of divine reason. Where God is unknowable, Jesus the son as the Logos, is a certainty, a real person. As Christ is the Logos, the word of God is made logical and therefore knowable to all. Through Christ the Logos, we can know God.

Part Three talks about the Holy Spirit, which comes from both God and Jesus, being worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets. Last week James told us that through the power of the Holy Spirit, God is revealed in our personal experiences. The Holy Spirit gives us the boldness to proclaim God as our father and Jesus his son as our counselor and comforter. Through the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit remains as an active force in our spiritual lives, where revelation and joy reside.

But there are four parts to the Nicene Creed. And the fourth part, there at the very end, has to do with us: the church.

This part wasn't in the original Creed of 325AD. The new Church percolated along for 56 years until Constantine in 381AD called another council of high muckety-mucks to come to Constantinople and review the Nicene Creed. Apparently, they saw that something was missing. We have the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but what about us? It is obvious throughout the Gospels that Jesus intended to start a new faith experience, intended to start a new church. Recognizing this, the new Part Four was added.

“We believe in one / holy / catholic / 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.”

One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic. These have come to be known as the four marks of the Christian Church.

ONE. Last week we heard from Paul's letter to the new Christians in Corinth, Greece. He wrote, “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.” He goes on to say, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

Today, with some 3500 Christian denominations around the world, it would seem that “One” is the last word to come to mind when describing this Christian church. But consider the paintbrush we all are painted with when a radical pastor

appears at the funerals of our American servicemen killed overseas and disrupts the solemn proceedings by proclaiming that these young men and women were lost because God is angry at our country. Such a thought is abhorrent to us, for sure. But the unchurched may look on and decide that this must be what the Christian church is all about and therefore vow to have nothing to do with us. As Paul observed, “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it.”

On the other hand, Pope Francis holds a mass on Copacabana Beach in Brazil, and 3million people attend. Three million people! He proclaims that the Church must become more humble, more accessible, more merciful in order to be more Christ-like. The old guard scratches their heads, and the progressives say “amen, about time! We should be more about Christ and less about Christendom.”

And just before Easter last year, Pope Francis celebrated the Holy Thursday Mass of the Last Supper at a prison, where he washed the feet of twelve inmates, men and women, from Nigeria, Congo, Ecuador, Brazil, and Italy.

“Jesus never tires of loving,” Francis told the 300 inmates.

And the whole world watched the Vicar of Christ being Christ-like.

As Paul observed, “if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

Like it or not, we are all in this together. All are judged by the actions of any one of us. All of us, we are One. You and I – we may be the only Christ that someone ever sees. You, me, us: One.

The second mark of the church is HOLY. The Church is holy. It is not secular, it is not ordinary, it is not just another social club or place to have pot-luck dinners. The Church is holy. We, as the Church, are holy. The word holy means to be set apart for a special purpose by and for God. We are not holy because of what we have done. We have not earned our holiness.

The Church is holy because God made it so. As we enter a holy thing, and become involved with it, our lives will and must change. God the creator told Moses at the burning bush to remove his sandals before coming closer because he was in a holy place. His actions, his outlook, must change. The Church is holy, having been set apart for a special purpose. Here in this neighborhood across from Fairview School, sits a holy place. It has a special purpose, put here by God Almighty himself. If we are to be one with God, it is our destiny to discern what that special purpose here in this place and at this time must be. We are one. We are holy.

The third mark of the Church is CATHOLIC. The lower-case C catholic. The word means universal, applicable to all and open to all. We might recall the marvelous story of the first Pentecost, fifty days after Christ's resurrection, when the disciples, closeted away in that upper room, were suddenly visited by the Holy Spirit, and they were consumed by that Spirit. They rushed downstairs and outside and began to preach to the crowds in the streets around them. And we are told that there were dwelling in Jerusalem at that time devout people out of every nation under heaven. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene. And yet, as the disciples preached the mighty works of God, everybody, regardless of what language they spoke, heard the holy words in their own language, in a way that they could understand.

We modern Christians celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the Christian Church. And what did we do on our very first birthday? We declared to the whole world in languages everyone could understand that this Church – our church – is open to all. We are one, we are holy, we are universal and open to all.

The fourth mark of the Church is APOSTOLIC. We follow the examples of the apostles, those chosen by Jesus to be his church in this world. Way before they became apostles, they were just curious followers who recognized there was something different about this local boy who talked about the new kingdom of heaven. Without question, perhaps even without so much as a look backward, they left what they were doing and answered the call: "Follow me." Into uncertain times, they followed. Through times of being broke and hungry and having no place to stay the night, they followed. Into some very dangerous times, still they followed. When it came right down to life and death, they did what most of us would do: they broke ranks and ran away. But they came together again, and the risen Jesus appeared among them and blessed them with the Holy Spirit. And they would never run away again. They followed, even to the ends of their lives.

We have a tradition in the Episcopal Church that is called Apostolic Succession. Saint Peter, upon whom Jesus founded his church, commissioned others to spread the church by laying his hands on their shoulders or foreheads as a way of passing the blessing of Jesus onto them. These new bishops also laid hands on the new bishops they ordained, and so on. Our rite of ordination of bishops, priests, and deacons includes a laying on of hands during the ceremony. When you are confirmed into the Episcopal Church, the bishop lays hands on you during the ceremony.

In an unbroken line of successive hands, the person touching you was touched by another before, who was touched by another before that, and so on, hand upon hand, all the way back to a couple of thousand years ago, when someone was touched by Saint Peter himself, as he was touched by his friend and lord, Jesus the Christ.

We are one church, we are made holy by the will of God, we are open to all, and we have all been touched by the hands of Jesus. We believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic church.

In the second sentence of this Part Four of the Creed, we also declare that we believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

In his letter to the new church in Ephesus, Turkey, Paul writes, “There is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all, and through all, and in all.”

In the years leading up to the conference in 325, there had been a lot of heated exchanges about whether a follower of a certain Christian community should be re-baptized if that person should join another, different Christian community. The conference wisely decided that to say, “yes, rebaptism is appropriate in such a circumstance” was also saying that the other baptism wasn’t good enough, or the other Christian community wasn’t good enough.

But Paul in his letter to the Ephesians is very clear: One baptism into one faith of one God and Father of all. Through baptism, whenever and wherever it may have happened, we each have established our personal bond with our God. The Nicene Creed affirms that sacred and everlasting relationship.

We end the Nicene Creed with a hopeful little prayer. “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” Everything in the Creed that has come before is pretty strong, declaring with certainty that we believe some definite things. We sound confident and on solid ground throughout. These parts are based on the past: because of things we have learned and have experienced, we declare that we have come to believe certain things.

Then, here at the very end we say this short little sentence that reveals our yearnings for the future, our collective longing for a better world to come. Here, at the very end of the Creed, comes the future: that uncertain thing, that unknowable thing.

And in this last sentence we might sound a little apprehensive, but still I think we also sound very optimistic. We don't merely hope for resurrection of the dead and a new and continuing life for the world. No, we're looking for it. We expect to see it. Perhaps it is up to us to make it happen.

The past will not be forgotten. Those who came before us have not lived in vain. We look forward to the new life of this world to come. This is where the affirmation of our faith has led us.

We are one faith community, our church is holy and open to all, we follow the ways of the apostles. But most importantly, after all is said and done, we look forward.

As Christians, we are people of the future.

Amen.