

February 7, 2016 – Last Sunday of Epiphany and 5th in series on the Nicene Creed

Welcome to our fifth and final Sunday on the Nicene Creed. For those of you who have been here every Sunday, you may be asking right now, “but I thought Gregg finished that up last Sunday”? That was my argument as well, particularly since I seem to struggle with the whole concept of creeds in general, Nicene or otherwise. Well clearly that was a mistake because now there was no way the team was going to give me a free pass on this morning.

But fear not, I do not plan on discussing my personal struggle with creeds. Those of us who have hung around church folks for awhile know that we all have special passages and phrases that are sacred for us, and the creed may be one of yours. When we are confused and struggling with doubt, we need familiar words that provide a spiritual compass and a moral grounding. And when we are facing a period of great physical or emotional crisis, we need words that are stored deep in our memories to provide us with comfort and solace.

However, unlike the 23rd Psalm or the Lord’s Prayer or the even the lines from a beloved hymn, the creed, from its very inception, came with a lot of controversy. It not only split asunder the early church family into Roman and Orthodox branches, it also split asunder many Christian communities who felt unable to give up their own spiritual vision. Clearly those ancient Bishops were faced with some hard choices and I would not have wanted to walk in their shoes. We are still struggling with the question of how to balance unity of thought and freedom of spirit. And we still struggle with the question of how to balance faith with political power for that matter, so we are in no position to judge.

The creed was strong medicine for a very troubled time. And as all of us know who have ever been prescribed a strong medicine,

there is always the potential for undesired side effects. Unfortunately the good Bishops did not send their creed off with any warning labels ... perhaps because they did not know what those side effects might be. So let's take a moment and consider possible warnings for ourselves.

First, let us remember to take our creeds with a generous supply of humility and compassion. We might be willing to give our life for our religious beliefs but we should not be willing to take someone else's life because of theirs. History has recorded far too many wars, inquisitions, pogroms, and holocaust, to say nothing of terrorist attacks, all in the "name of God". The psalmist writes that God knows us in every detail, but we are not likely to be able to claim to know God with that same certainty. There will always be the unknown and the unknowable with God. Part of the holiness of the divine is that God is still the ultimate mystery. It's human nature to want to know the answers and to believe that our answers are the right ones but it can sometimes be a fine line between spiritual assurance and spiritual arrogance.

A second warning is that strong medicine can make life very stressful and we need to learn to be kind to ourselves and remember that guilt can be a real landmine on the spiritual path. Let's not forget that answers always have a partner, they're called questions!

Like most families, we want to send our children off in life with a solid knowledge of the really important answers, whether they came from our catechism, our creed, or for that matter, from the wise sayings of a beloved grandfather. But we all eventually learn that even though mom might have pinned the answers to the inside of our shirt pocket, we still have to "live the questions". Sometimes the obvious questions come early, like what will I do for a living, who should I marry or where do I want to live? After that, the questions are often more subtle and obscure; things like

Why does evil happen and what is my responsibility for responding in such a confusing and complex world? And in particular, what is my response at this moment in a confrontation with my neighbor?

We can become like Gideon in this morning's reading, who when greeted by a messenger from heaven, while he was frantically seeking to escape eminent destruction, calls out "If the Lord really is with us, why has all this happened to us? What has become of all those wonderful deeds of his?"

One of the gifts of Judaism is its affirmation to the faithful that they can question, even argue, with the Almighty. Sometimes we too can feel like crying out, "Why Lord are your laws always written in black and white while I'm expected to apply them in a world of grays?" Or to adapt a line from the Fiddler on the Roof, "Lord, would it spoil some great eternal plan" ... if you would give me a hint from time to time? And I can imagine God replying, "Jan, I give you lots of hints but you have to admit that when you're in a royal stew, you don't listen all that well. But to answer your question, YES, it would spoil my great eternal plan because I want you to grow your spiritual maturity as far as you can. Remember the parable Jesus told you about the merchant who was willing to sacrifice all that he had for that pearl of great price? Well, that's the way I want you to seek out truth and wisdom. True, my Grace is always freely given, but I never said it was cheap. If all you want are a strand of imitation pearls, go buy a self-help book."

Yes, it's hard to live the questions, so we need to be kind to ourselves. The problem is that when the questions relate to our faith, the ones we're supposed to already have the answer to, then questioning can be viewed as sinful doubt, which in turn can cause us shame and guilt. "How could I even think that? What would the people at church say ... or my priest? Well obviously, the last

place I'm going to ever talk about this ... is in church!" Oh how could we have gone so wrong!

Guilt can literally be a land mine on the spiritual path. If we can't feel free to be honest with our questions and our doubts and our God, then what are our choices? We might just put binders on and block all questions from view or we might become so overcome by one particular question that our whole faith just collapses like a house of cards. And what a waste for our souls and what a loss for the church!

But my last and final warning is actually one of hope. Our doctor will usually reassure us that if we swallow our false pride and take our medicine and treat ourselves with care, with time the treatment will work and healing will happen. So in true Creedal fashion, let it be known that

... "I do believe" that if we truthfully and honestly follow our own spiritual path, accepting our questions and doubts as a natural part of the journey and focusing faithfully on our relationship with God, in time answers will begin to arise out of our own unique experience of faith. We may not get all our answers, our answers may not be perfect and your answers may not be exactly like mine; but with integrity and humility God will reveal to us what needs to be revealed to us and what we need to hear by us.

And ... "I do believe" that when we have come full circle, we will return to where we started and it will be completely different. Oh, we may discover that we have come back to all the same answers as before, but now they are OUR ANSWERS because we have chosen them for ourselves.

In closing, I want to share one of the more amusing parts of this process for me. Last fall my husband and I had long time friends visit for the weekend. Our friend Scott is a leader in the Universal Sufi movement and I was sharing with him my struggle with creeds. He said, "Jan do you know the root meaning for the

word heresy? It means to choose.” I started to laugh. So God really does have a sense of humor because at the end of the journey we all are forced to be a bit of a heretic because we all must choose. As the old Negro spiritual says, “no one else can do it for you, you must do for yourself.” Only by choosing can beliefs not simply be an idea in your head but be a treasure in your heart and a fire in your soul.

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