

Creed of Our Hope

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2005

Romans 5:1-11 NIV

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:5-6).

As you know, the seasons of the church year revolve around the life of Christ, and the special days we celebrate commemorate events in his earthly ministry: the expectation of the Messiah, Jesus' birth, the visit of the Magi, Jesus' baptism, his transfiguration, his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, Jesus' crucifixion, his resurrection from the dead, his ascension into heaven and his gift of the Holy Spirit. So we pass through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Ascensiontide and Pentecost celebrating special events that occurred in the history of our salvation, events through which God has moved to restore the goodness of his creation — to undo the effects of sin, gather for himself a new and faithful community in Christ, and accomplish his redemptive purpose for his human family.

But today we come to a different kind of celebration. Trinity Sunday is a unique day in the church calendar. For it's the only special day that lifts up not an event, but a doctrine. It's a doctrine we need to talk about, because the Trinity is foundational to our faith. We recognize its importance here at Union Congregational Church, for as we gather each week we always begin our worship in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But how well do we understand this basic Christian concept?

We need to be clear about what the Holy Trinity is and what it isn't. Much harm has come to the church, and to the world, because Christians have misunderstood this doctrine. Some Christians of seventh-century Arabia thought of the Trinity as three divinities, God, Jesus and Mary — at least that's the impression they gave to a young man named Mohammed, who was so revolted by this that he founded a new religion called Islam to focus on the oneness of Allah. In our post-9-11 world we're still dealing with the consequences of this misunderstanding of the Trinity. Other groups in the Western world, groups as diverse as the Unitarians and the Jehovah's Witnesses, had their origins in a protest against the doctrine of the Trinity, because they took it as a declaration that there are three Gods. But that isn't what the doctrine of the Trinity claims.

Another misunderstanding of the Trinity is to say it's God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This isn't the proper way to speak of it. The correct way is to invoke *God* the Father, *God* the Son and *God* the Holy Spirit. We sometimes speak of "God in three persons," as in the well-known hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy." All "persons" of the Trinity are fully God — the *same* God, who is One. The Father is God reigning as Creator. Jesus is God incarnate as the Son. The Spirit is God active in yet another way, in the lives of his people. All three "persons" are fully the same God, not three different gods.

The confusion comes from the word “person,” which was adopted by early Christian theologians to try to get a handle on the idea of the Trinity. To us, a “person” is an individual, an entity separate from others. But the Latin word *persona* means “sounding through,” and refers to a mask worn by ancient dramatists. When they wanted to act one part, they put on that mask and spoke through it. When they wanted to act a different part, they put on a different *persona*. But it was the same actor speaking through different masks. So we meet God in different ways, or “persons,” and we give different names to these ways: Father, Son, Spirit. But he’s always the same God. Sadly, Mohammed, the Unitarians and the Jehovah’s Witnesses could never figure that out!

Even the idea of three “persons” of the Trinity is only an analogy from human culture — an image borrowed from familiar experience in the attempt to make God understandable. No analogy can fully encompass the being of God, who is beyond our understanding. Sometimes Christians forget this, and try to make their statements of Christian doctrine the equivalent of the “real thing,” the absolute truth about God. This happens with many concepts in the Bible, and it happens with the Trinity also. But theologians have always recognized that the Trinity is a *mystery*. That doesn’t just mean something we can’t figure out. The Greek word *mysterion* means a truth that has to be *revealed to us* by God, because otherwise it would never occur to us. As Paul wrote, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 2:9-10).

So you won’t find, in the Bible, a developed statement about the Trinity. The word *Trinity* isn’t even found in Scripture. Instead, you find statements that speak of God’s activity in a threefold manner, but without trying to explain the relationships of his inner being. In Ephesians, for example, Paul says this: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). Notice two groups of three here. There is one Spirit, one Lord — that is, Christ — and one God and Father. And the Father is described in three ways: “above all and through all and in all.” In our reading today from Romans 5, Paul again uses the threefold description of God’s work, without elaborating a doctrine of the Trinity. “Hope does not disappoint us,” he says, “because *God* has poured out his love into our hearts by the *Holy Spirit*, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, *Christ* died for the ungodly (Romans 5:5-6). There’s only one place in the Bible, in fact, where the “standard” expression for the Trinity is used, and that’s in Jesus’ “Great Commission” to his apostles in Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*”

In the Bible, then, the Trinity isn’t a doctrine debated by learned theologians. Instead, the “persons” of the Trinity make God known in the lives of his people, as they serve and worship him. You see, the place where the doctrine of the Trinity really belongs isn’t in the classroom, the lecture hall or the dusty tomes of a theological reference library. The Trinity is at home where God’s people *serve and worship* — where they lift up praise, confess their faith, affirm their hope in God, and receive the sacraments. It’s through our worship that we come to understand — or to *stand under* — the mystery of “God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.” Historical theologians have a Latin expression for this: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. It means, roughly, “The way we *worship* governs the way we *believe*.”

Which brings us to the title of this message, “Creed of Our Hope.” I would like us to spend a few minutes examining the Apostles’ Creed, with which we opened our service today. The Apostles’ Creed originated in a confession known as the *Roman Symbol*. It was a baptismal creed, a brief statement of faith for those coming into the Christian community. As such, it’s an expression of our Christian hope. And, as you know, it’s also an expression of the doctrine of the Trinity, for it has three paragraphs: “I believe in God the Father . . . I believe in his only Son . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Let’s take a quick look at each of these three paragraphs.

First, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” That doesn’t seem like very much to say about God the Father, does it? But that brief statement is packed with meaning. First of all, it’s significant that we should even make that statement — affirming our belief, our trust, our faith in God the Father. That’s really the starting point of all Christian conviction. Francis Schaeffer used to say that the first declaration of the Christian gospel isn’t, “Christ died for your sins.” The first declaration is,

“There is a God.” If God isn’t real, sin has no meaning because there’s no one to judge what’s sin and what isn’t. Nobody would be interested in being forgiven of sin unless he knows he’s a sinner — and that requires the reality of God. And nobody would expect to be forgiven of sin unless there’s Someone who can forgive it — and that also requires the reality of God. And, in a world full of problems, stress and disappointment, nobody would hope for a better life in this world or the next unless there’s Someone who can create that life and fulfill that hope. In the words of Hebrews 11:6, “Whoever would draw near to God *must believe that he exists* and that he rewards those who seek him.”

We live in a culture that denies the reality of God, that wants to exclude him from all public debate. But trying to deny God is like putting on a blindfold on a bright, beautiful day and then claiming that the sun doesn’t exist. As Paul says in Romans 1:19-20, “What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” If God the Creator doesn’t exist — the “Maker of heaven and earth” —there’s no reason why anything at all should exist.

One more important point. We say, “I believe in God the Father.” That’s more than simply saying, “Okay, I believe there’s a God.” Calling him *Father* puts us into a *relationship* with him. He’s the head of our *family*. The Bible has different terms for this relationship — the kingdom of God, the covenant, the household of faith. They all amount to the same thing: we only know God to the extent that we’re *bonded with him* as members of his family. We might have a theoretical knowledge that God exists, and even amass a wonderful collection of data that supposedly prove he exists. But none of that makes God real to us until we’re born into his family, and learn how to hear his voice, obey him and come to him with our needs. Our hope isn’t in an idea, it’s in our Father — “God the Father Almighty.”

The Apostles’ Creed’s middle paragraph is about the Son, the second “person” of the Trinity. “And [I believe] in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hades; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.” There’s a lot here; this paragraph is full of what theologians call *Christology*, the doctrine of who Christ is. It would take us all day, or many long days, to do justice to what we say here about Jesus. But we don’t have to, because we do it the whole year through. For this paragraph is a *story*, the story of Christ: his advent, his birth, his passion and death, his resurrection and ascension, his rule from heaven, his coming in judgment. And this story is the basis for all the seasons of the Christian year, as we mentioned at the beginning of this message. Through the special days of the Christian calendar we celebrate and re-enact these events of the gospel story, the story of Christ Jesus our Lord.

It’s important to remind ourselves that this is a story. The Creed doesn’t give us a list of qualities of Christ, or lay out all the doctrinal nuances of the incarnation or the atonement or eschatology or any other high-powered theological construct. Instead, the Creed speaks about *a man who did certain things* at a particular time in the history of the human race, and will do even more in days to come. We confess our faith by telling the story of one man who lived and died and lives again. We don’t place our hope in a doctrine — an idea about Jesus, a set of abstract concepts about how he could be the Son of God and how he saves us. We place our hope in Jesus himself, who says, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Revelation 1:17-18). The basis for our faith in the Son is the same as the basis for our faith in the Father. It’s a basis of *relationship* to an actual human being who walked the face of the earth, suffered humiliation under a Roman governor whose name even gets mentioned in the Creed, shed real blood, died an excruciating death — and then defeated that evil power and lives to rescue us from it, too. Jesus is not just an idea, he’s the Son of God, our Lord to whom we belong. And because we belong to him, we can hope and believe that his victory will be ours, as well.

Finally, the Apostles’ Creed’s third paragraph speaks of the Holy Spirit. And it’s very interesting what gets included in the part about the Holy Spirit: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church universal, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” The church itself is the creation of the Holy Spirit. It was on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came in power upon the apostles, that they first proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus Christ to all who

would listen. When that day dawned there were 120 believers, the Book of Acts tells us — the eleven apostles, plus newly chosen Matthias, and a group of others who were followers of Jesus, including his mother Mary and a number of other women. By the end of the day there were 3,000 new believers in Christ! That's why Pentecost is often called "the birthday of the church," and it was the work of the Holy Spirit. We're here today because the Spirit of God continues to work *in* the church, and *with* the church, the "bride of Christ," inviting people to become members of his body. "The Spirit and the bride say, 'come.'"

In the Creed we declare, "I believe in the communion of saints." It's a reminder that as we do the work of God we're not alone, isolated in the time frame of the present. We're "surrounded by a cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1), servants of the Lord through all ages who encourage us through the Spirit. In the Creed we also declare, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." It's the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to the truth about ourselves, and convicts us of sin. It's the Spirit who guides us toward Jesus, who died on the cross to defeat sin's hold upon us. Sometimes people speak of "the unpardonable sin," and Jesus explains what that sin is. "Anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven" (Luke 12:10). Why not? Because it's through the Spirit that God's forgiveness is communicated to us, and if we deny the Spirit we can't receive it.

It's through the Holy Spirit, finally, that God makes his life-giving power known to his people. In fact, the Spirit is often called the "Giver of life," for Jesus told us, "It is the spirit that gives life" (John 6:63). That's why the Apostles' Creed ends with these words: "I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Our hope in the future is established by the Holy Spirit; as Paul writes in today's Scripture lesson, "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. . . . And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:2, 5).

We need hope to live. We need hope to live now, amidst the difficulties of this present world. We need hope to maintain our expectation of life in the world to come, once the veil of this age is torn away and we meet God face to face. Worship is about hope, and the Apostles' Creed we use in worship is about hope, and the Holy Trinity is about hope. An so we witness to that hope, and to the glory yet to be revealed to us and in us, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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