

Images Behind Our Creeds, Confessions, and Statements of Faith

Chapter 2 of Creeds, Confessions and Statements of Faith

This is the second chapter in our series on creeds, confessions and statements of faith.

Last week I reminded you that our traditional creeds – the Apostles, the Nicene and the Athanasian – were written to answer questions of their day. Specifically, “Was Jesus really human?”... “Was Jesus really divine?”... And then, “Do we really worship one God or three? – The meaning of the Trinity.

And then I asked whether the questions of our day are being answered. Perhaps they are not even really being asked. So, I left it to you to ponder what are the questions of our day that you would ask? With of course the challenge that follows: “What do we need to say to the world today?”

It was an excellent place to begin as we celebrated the Sunday of the Trinity.

Over the years I have heard people ask, “Why do we need to say one or the other of these creeds every Sunday?”

And it has been asked, “What do I do if I don’t believe some of these words? Do I skip them? Substitute for them? And if I don’t believe these words, but they are in the constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, am I somehow at fault, perhaps even heretical?”

And if there is a service where a confession of faith is substituted, without being endorsed or affirmed or somehow voted on... am I being heretical?

But then perhaps one might ask, “what does it matter to you or to anyone else if you are just a bit – heretical – or perhaps doubtful?”

I ask all these questions – I proposed this series of reflections – because I want you to be honest about what you say and do in worship. I want you to think about it. And to be bold... when you can be bold. And to be questioning, searching, doubting... when, honestly, that’s where your heart is.

But that's the theme for next week!

So, I am offering you today some images that perhaps might be helpful for you to understand why we need these creeds, and what they are intended to do.

You may have noticed that I have chosen nautical symbols, marine symbols. And for good reason. Again, another layer of meaning, perhaps.

Over the centuries churches were built long and narrow... and roofs were arched. The length portrayed the distance between humanity and God. The height represented the majesty and transcendence of the divine, high above the human. And together, length and height and width and arch architecturally captured the nature of the experience of faith as a journey and the container of that faith was the shape of a ship. Only, it was upside down! Together this worship space was even called "the nave."

Welcome aboard.

I begin with an anchor. An anchor of course is dropped over the side of the vessel to hold it fast, to keep it from drifting. There are dangers in drifting, floating out of control, literally beyond one's depth. One never knows where one may end up.

Our first lesson this morning was taken from the ten commandments, together given to provide order and direction for life. We begin teaching our youngest about how to behave...learn the rules: be nice... love God... love your neighbor... don't lie... don't steal.

Don't hurt anyone... Stay in the yard... eat your vegetables... go to bed when it's time... obey your parents. God is like a parent, one to be obeyed. And there will be others to obey that come along in life: teachers, coaches, police, employers... spouses.

And the first commandment is that God is God. We are not. We would like to be in charge... We would like to be obeyed. Maybe, with time and maturity and authority and discipline the hierarchy of things might change. But at the front end of life... in the shallows of the waters, it is best to follow the rules.

One might choose then to have a symbol of a fence or a soccer field or a coloring book. Learn to stay between the lines. But those are not marine symbols. So, we'll start with an anchor. Don't drift.

And in other matters of faith, are there opportunities to drift? We learn early the temptations of someone else's toys, someone else's yard. And we might be in our teens or twenties or fifties when temptations to covet drift us off course. And the jealousy and longing of coveting ...moves from heart to hands... from desires to action. And stealing, killing, lying, seducing, pretending to be God, threaten to rip the keel out of the boat.

There is only one God.

But, sin is real, and God chose to come and be one of the people, one with the people. God did not want to watch people hurt themselves and one another and the bounty God had created. God did not want to be one of the other gods that people worshiped and feared and appeased... High above in the heavens or down below in the seas.

So Jesus came to be one with us. He brought love and healing and fullness and freedom. He brought everything that loving parents bring. But some did not like that. They liked what he brought, certainly, but not that he had it to bring. They did not like to whom he gave it. So they used the little power they had – assuming it was more power than he would use – and they killed him.

But that was not the end of the story. That was not how Jesus would use his power. Jesus had this way of calming storms, not stirring them. He would not sink his ships, if he could raise them... even from hell.

So, we tell this story... a story of Creation by the Father, Salvation by the Son, and the fullness of life – some called that Sanctification- under the presence and power of the Spirit.

Everyone lives by a story. What's yours? "Be a winner." "Go home with all the toys, the trophies and the rewards." "Make people like you, even if it destroys you." "Believe and you can have – Believe and you can do!"

I had a neighbor whose story was this: “You can’t be too young, too rich or too thin.” I think she ended up on the rocks. Her daughter did.

We gather to worship. We gather, invited by a story, inspired by a story, finding our place in a story, finding our future in a story.

Here is guidance, lest we drift.

And we ask, like children do... “tell me the story about...” And we find peace in that.

Well, actually, as the symbol behind the psalm illustrated, life in the Spirit brings joy and adventure and singing! It can be wild!

One might think that the breath of God pushes the ship of the church forward. But those who sail know that the sail is more like a wing... the wind curves over the surface, not the back. It accelerates and creates lift and draws forward – inviting – propelling – faster and faster until... in what seems the blink of an eye, life is over.

But another adventure awaits.

What’s your story? There isn’t all joy and adventure in life, is there? Sometimes it seems like life is going nowhere...

Or we’ve met with vicious, cruel pirates. Something has been stolen and we have nothing....The joints in the boat creak with rot.... There are leaks..... Sails, and everything else, sag.

We long for the days when we could do everything ourselves. Go where we wanted, when we wanted, with whom we wanted...

And there were days... and seasons... Small adventures. Small discoveries. Small accomplishments....

But there are also the days...

And we might be bitter. We could be bitter.

The gulls that used to share our delight... seem to laugh at us... If they come any more at all.

Weren't we supposed to end life with all the toys? Safe? Better off at the end than before? Or are those the stories of unscrupulous salesmen and deceivers... and pirates?

Sometimes we don't know any more what we used to know...

Sometimes there is a hollowness in saying I believe... I used to believe... I don't know what to believe...

Then Jesus... or the Spirit... or the loving Father... the one you miss the most... shows up.

And this Divine presence... this soft breeze... this tugging wind appears again.

"Where would you like to go?" you are asked.

"Are you willing to follow me?" you are asked.

"Here. You look hungry. Take and eat...."

"You look dry and weary and exhausted... Would you mind if I splashed you with water... and blessing... like I did before?"

"Do you remember how we used to enjoy green pastures and still waters?"

And don't forget those desert places, wilderness places, you loved to visit... and those thrilling places where you got lost! But not really. I was with you.

"Remember?"

And then, you realize that what you no longer know in your head – what you used to believe – doesn't matter.

What you know now... you learned from the heart...

We don't believe ideas. They get forgotten, discredited, debunked...

Faith doesn't come from pages memorized.

You can memorize beliefs...

But you experience faith.

Faith comes from a story lived... a community loved... a purpose fulfilled...

And something... not yet finished...

You leave behind the photos and souvenirs and ribbons – all the stuff you would grab in a fire or a flood...

You leave all that.... Because it's just dead weight.

And you take what you can only carry in your heart.

And now you ask, "What's next? ... Which way... Show me.... I trust...."

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