

Matthew 16:13-20
June 26, 2011

South Plains

The Heart of the Creed

When I was visiting in the hospital recently, one of our neighbors from Union Grove Baptist Church greeted me warmly in the hallway. I have no idea what her job is in the medical center or what most of the employees do, because hospitals have so many specialties today. And, when I could not read her dangling nametag, I looked for the one distinguishing mark that identifies doctors and nurses, the stethoscope. Doctors and nurses, and maybe a few others, still hang their trademark stethoscope around their necks. They do this because listening for the heartbeat of a patient remains one of the indispensable vital signs of health. With all the scans and graphs and printouts available to modern medicine, the ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump of the human heart is the sign of life.

In the same way, the words “Jesus Christ” are at the heart of the creeds of the church just as Jesus is the heart and soul of Christian life. Christianity attracts and converts people for all kinds of reasons – the pleasure of good fellowship, the guidance of high moral standards, intellectual stimulation, good work in our missions, the nurture of young lives, the hope of the afterlife, and a host of other characteristics found in a good church such as South Plains. The lifeblood of Christian faith,

however, courses through the church from the heart of our faith which is the person of Jesus.

Very quickly the Apostles Creed moves from God the Father, the Creator to “Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.” Over the next few weeks I want to unpack the Apostles Creed. In doing so, we’ll spend much of our time talking about Christ because, first, that was the critical issue for the church in the early centuries of the Christian movement when this creed was developing; and, second, I believe the person of Jesus Christ is once again the critical issue for the church in the 21st century.

Lots of people believe in God. According to the Gallup Poll, about 78% of Americans affirm the existence of God, and a majority of those say religious faith is important for their lives. This is so even when people say they do not attend any church or identify with any religion. Three questions come to mind: what makes Jesus so important? How does this Jesus work for us today? And, why is he still arousing such passion? Therefore, we start unpacking the creed with how it happened that Jesus of Nazareth, a poor Jew living in a tiny country that was occupied and overrun by the mighty Roman Empire, how this person who was eventually killed as a criminal by the Romans, became the heart of our religion.

The answer is found in his life, death and resurrection. Both the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed rehearse these salient facts about Jesus. What

both creeds leave out are the details provided by the gospels. Matthew brings our beliefs about Jesus to a climax in the passage we heard this morning. Peter makes an early confession of faith: "You are the Messiah," he tells Jesus, "The Son of the living God." Notice where this statement comes in the gospel story, in chapter 16. Matthew has spent thirteen chapters describing the ministry of Jesus, his teaching, healing and miracles. People are talking. Jesus asks what they are saying. What he really wants to know is this, "But who do you say that I am?"

By waiting until this point in his gospel to have Peter confess his faith, Matthew lets us see how Peter came to that conclusion and how we might come to the same faith. The Messiah was a familiar figure to the Jews. They longed for God to send the Messiah, or the Christ to save them from the Romans, to restore proper worship in Jerusalem, to judge the wicked and save the righteous, and above all to revive the faith of the people of God. Jesus of Nazareth did not fulfill all those expectations, but he matched the job description in Isaiah 49 closely enough so that those who knew him best connected the dots that led to this affirmation: Jesus is the Messiah, the prophet foretold by Isaiah, the authentic Servant of the Lord.

His crucifixion and death would have dealt a fatal blow to the faith of Jesus' followers. His resurrection, however, demanded a reinterpretation of Messiahship. Guided by the Holy Spirit and taught by the resurrected

Jesus, they realized he was the suffering servant described by Isaiah. His death was in obedience to his service and is somehow essential to the salvation he brings. All the benefits of Christianity are tied as tightly to the person of Jesus Christ as sunshine is tied to Virginia in June, or as your pulse, one of the vital signs of your life is tied to your own heart.

How does this work for us today who are not Jewish and who are citizens of the United States, the most powerful empire in the 21st century world? Surely no one here has a problem with our government. No one here worries whether the wicked are found guilty and the righteous rewarded. All the churches are happy and prospering because everyone has faith. Of course, one of those is true. It turns out that although our circumstances are very different from the world of first century Palestine, our needs are very much the same. We're still looking for a savior by any name: someone to save us from the government and to revive faith in something even if it's just the housing market.

In our better moments, we know that Pogo was right. The government, the economy and the churches are us. Faith in Jesus Christ does, nonetheless, give us the tools and temperament to make a better world. When we follow the Jesus who fulfilled those Old Testament expectations for a Christ of justice, we begin to constructively judge the wicked and make life better for those who are innocent, if not righteous. The Jews were not wrong in wanting justice in the Empire. But, God's

strategy was a non-violent revolution that holds justice and love together. We have not yet fulfilled the promise of that revolution. That's one of the reasons I believe the IMPACT network of churches and Habitat for Humanity have an important role in our church. Along with many other organizations, they advocate with love on behalf of a more just world. They give us the chance to flesh out, to make real, and to incarnate the life of Jesus Christ in Charlottesville and in the surrounding counties.

The incredible feature of groups like IMPACT and Habitat is our diversity. We are not all followers of Jesus Christ, at least not by any ecclesiastical definition. Yet, from my point of view, we work in the spirit of the loving Christ and we work for the just and righteous world of the kingdom of God.

Why does the figure of Jesus Christ continue to inspire and correct the church? Christ has a heart to heart connection with Christians. We find that connection expressed in the music of the church with older hymns like "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," and with newer songs like "I Danced in the Morning" that adapted a Shaker melody for contemporary words. We find it in the 12th century words of Bernard of Clairvaux who has four hymns in the *Presbyterian Hymnal*.

That connection appears most simply in the children's song, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." As important as scripture is to me, I know Jesus loves not only in the words of the Bible, but

also because Miss Niemyer showed my Jesus' love in the nursery of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church; because Hugh McCauley put up with my 6th grade smart mouth; because Don Wade and Carle Henson knocked on my dorm door to invite me to a Bible study on Jesus; because Irby Cauthen and a host of other professors modeled the possibility of loving God with both mind and heart.

At the heart of the creed, at the heart of the church, and in the heart of every Christian, Jesus connects. We say the creed to keep the line open. Some days we repeat those words with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Other days, we may say the words without much conviction, letting our voice follow the sound of the congregation. Someone asked once, "How can I recite the Apostles Creed when I don't know that all of it is really true?" We don't say those words because we have proven their truth. We say them in the hope that they will be true for us.