

“The Nicene Creed: God the Parent”

Mark 4:35-41, Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

June 24, 2018

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The most fundamental human relationship is parent-child, because it reflects our relationship with God.

For much of the early history of the Christian Church, it was illegal to be Christian. Many of the things that helped the church spread through the Roman Empire, a strong central government, a good system of roads, even a postal system for Paul to send all those letters, also contributed to the church being a threat to the Empire. The message of Jesus spread quickly around the Roman Empire after the death and resurrection of Jesus. But the Empire was concerned with stability and local people could worship their own gods as long as they also worshiped the emperor as divine. The Romans believed that one way to keep their empire stable was to have a common religion. If all the people in the empire believed that the emperor himself was a god, they would be reluctant to rebel against him. Christians had a difficult time with this idea. They were stubborn. They insisted that their loyalty should be given only to one God and to Jesus Christ. Many of them refused to worship the emperor. So this strong central government which had made it so easy for the evangelists to carry the gospel from one area of the Mediterranean to another, now turned against them. For the first few centuries of its existence, the church was occasionally persecuted. Christians would be put to death for refusing to worship as the empire insisted that they should.

This situation lasted until the beginning of the fourth century when the empire was embroiled in a fight over succession. There were several men who had laid claim to the throne, who wanted to be emperor. One of them was general on the army named Constantine. According to legend, on the eve of a great battle in which his forces were drastically outnumbered, Constantine had a dream in which he saw a symbol in the clouds of the Greek letters chi and rho superimposed on one another and heard a voice

saying, "In this sign, you shall conquer." He had those two letters put on his standards and the shields of his soldiers, and they routed his enemies. Constantine interpreted the sign as a Christian symbol because the letters are the first two letters in Christ. As he became emperor in the year 313, Constantine issued what is known as the "Edict of Milan," which for the first time proclaimed the empire's tolerance of Christianity. Constantine, like his predecessors, probably believed that a common religion would unite a diverse empire, but hoped that Christianity, which was still growing around the empire, would be that faith. It probably helped that his mother, Helena, was a baptized Christian. But in the early years of his reign, Constantine realized that this Christian faith, which he hoped would unify his empire, was not unified itself. What did Christians believe? Did they all believe the same thing? They said they believe in only one God, but they say they believe that this Jesus was divine. Didn't that mean that they believe in at least two Gods? Did Christians in Rome believe the same as Christians in Egypt or Spain? Constantine decided that the leaders of the church should gather together and make some decisions. A council was called to meet with the Emperor in the small Turkish town of Nicea in 325 A.D. More than three hundred bishops gathered there and eventually crafted the statement that we call the Nicene Creed. Some additions were made to this at a later council at Constantinople in 381, but most of the Christian church has used this document as a standard of belief, a creed, for the last 1700 years.

And it begins with a simple statement about God. We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. That's it. We believe in God. Simple, right? How could anyone argue about that? But it makes important points. It proclaims that we believe in one god, not two, not three, not a multitude, but one, and only one. No more worshiping of the emperor. There is only one God and it is not him. And we believe this God created the universe. This is obviously the god that Jesus believes in as he calms the storm. He calls on God who is the creator and master of all that is. He doesn't call on the sea god and the wind god, he calls on God. The Psalmist also proclaims

that God is the creator and that God is almighty. We believe in one God, the God who created everything, the God who has ultimate power and control. That's the God we believe in, way out there.

But the creed also says something else. It says that we believe in one God, the Father. We don't just believe that God is almighty, that God is out there somewhere. We believe that God is our father, our parent. What does that mean to you? The parenthood of God? We believe that God created us out of love. We believe that God cares about us. We believe that we are God's children, all of us. All of us who are part of creation have God as our parent and are part of God's family. We have a relationship with God, and with one another.

We've thought a lot this week about what parenthood means. The news programs have been full of the problems on the southern border of the United States. In arresting people from Mexico and Central America for crossing illegally into the US, we have been separating children from their parents. This has caused such an uproar in this country that the president has had to change that policy and try to find a solution that keeps families together. Because that is one of the basic facts of human existence that comes from our creator. We are put into families in this life to love and care for each other. And whenever and however it may happen that families are broken, then there is a tragic loss and a hurtful price to pay, most often by the children. When we affirm God as our Father, our Parent, we are affirming the primacy of this relationship. As Christians we should be the first to uphold the centrality of the parent-child relationship. We know, we believe, in our most ancient creed, in one God, the Father. That is our most basic, most cherished belief.

The Presbyterian Church General Assembly has been meeting this last week in St. Louis. The General Assembly meets every other year to discuss issues related to the whole church. This last week they spent much time discussing issues of immigration and how we as Christians and Presbyterians balance the need for national security with the Old Testament admonition to welcome the stranger and the

words of Jesus from Matthew 25, “when I was a stranger, you welcomed me.” That’s a difficult enough debate, but when we are adding in the separation of parents and children, we are dealing with the most basic of human relationships. This week the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly issued a statement on behalf of the whole church demanding that this process be halted, and that parents and children be reunited.

We believe in one God, the Father. I think the Stated Clerk made that statement because of our belief about God. It is our experience of God that as our parent, there is never a separation. God as our parent, will never abandon his children. It was the experience of the people of Israel that even when they were disobedient, that God did not abandon them. When they went into captivity in Babylon, God was there with them. It was the experience of the church that when Peter and Paul were thrown in jail, they were ministered to by angels. Even when the Roman Empire put Christians to death, it was the testimony of the martyrs that God through the Holy Spirit never abandoned them. That is our witness as well. *It has been a pretty tough month around here. We have gathered to celebrate the lives of Tom Ryan and Sarah Newell and we’ll gather again in a couple of weeks to celebrate Murray Cooper. But it’s hard because we feel their absence as well. And it came home to me when I was sitting in the hospital waiting room on Tuesday waiting to hear from our surgeon the results of my wife’s operation, that God is always with us. Because I wasn’t sitting there alone, people from this church were there with me, to stay with me for as long as I needed, for as long as Erin needed. A few weeks before, it had been my privilege to sit with Murray in his last minutes, and even there, as the last rays of the sun danced across his face, so as the sun set beyond the horizon, so Murray departed beyond the horizon of our sight, I knew that he was in the hands of God, in the hands of the Father, the one who made him and loves him best.* In the darkest of times, when we are most in need, when our lives are most difficult, when we are lost in a storm at sea, that’s when our God is most present with us, like a parent who will not abandon

us, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, like a mother hen whose wings are the shelter over her chicks. So our God is with us. We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty.