

## To Creed or Not to Creed—

By *Puck Purnell*

A spring Sunday. Warm at last. Daylight savings has brightened the bones of my soul. I'm up early as usual and sit with coffee in the morning quiet for my prayer and meditation time. Driving to church I listen to *Speaking of Faith* on NPR hosted by my former divinity school friend Krista Tippet. Her programs are always thought provoking, like spiritual candy. I thrive on ideas, old ones and new ones.

Some Sundays the altar guild arrives to prepare the church for worship; some Sundays a note on the sacristy door tells me I'm on my own. Today, I position the candles on the altar, place the Gospel Book on the left side of the Table, and put the veiled chalice and paten on the credence table. I set up my prayer book and re-read my sermon. It's about the beauty of Sedona, Arizona and the Chapel of the Holy Cross, one of the great attractions in that western Mecca.

The Holy Eucharist begins. "*Alleluia. Christ is risen!*" The people respond, "*The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia.*" I still love worship after these many years as priest, especially as celebrating participant. I try to pay attention to what I'm saying, words that shape belief and action. I listen to the scripture even though I've heard these passages many times before. What can I learn today? How can I perceive these ancient ideas with freshness? What do I agree with? What gives me trouble?

The sermon. I rarely preach for more than ten or twelve minutes. The challenge always is to be cogent. I am also interested in teaching, comforting, and, from time to time, being provocative. At my church there is always room for diversity of ideas as well as diversity of people.

When I return to my seat, I close my eyes for thirty seconds or so. This is when I gulp! I struggle to center myself because I'm about to lead the congregation in reciting the Nicene Creed, something that I

personally can't swallow.

Among the top three questions asked by parishioners and seekers is "What about the creeds? Do *you* believe what they say?" Good questions. Fair questions. Hard questions. "*We believe in one God...We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ...We believe in the Holy Spirit...*"

Mostly people ask because they have real difficulty saying these dusty, old words. They just can't accept them. They aren't relevant. Here is what I often hear: "I can't believe Jesus came *down* from heaven, was born of a *virgin*, or ascended back *up* into heaven. Get a grip. This is 2005. When will the Church get real?"

There are many who recite the Creed faithfully week-by-week without batting an eye. For them, there's something soothing in the cadence and the words are meaningful, just fine, or they don't matter. Yet, the uncomfortable faithful are saying, "The creeds are dishonest."

When people ask me about the creeds, I usually feel like a boy just caught in a lie. "No, I don't literally believe what the creeds say, that Jesus came *down* from heaven, was born of a *virgin*, or ascended back *up* into heaven." Heresy, you say! It's curious that those of us uncomfortable with the creeds today sound a lot like the Arians who were actually the *orthodox* of Christianity for more than three hundred years before Constantine and the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E.!

Some background: Liturgy in the Episcopal Church is centered in the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Nicene Creed is recited at each Holy Eucharist. This statement has long been considered a minimalist understanding of what it means to be a Christian according to the Councils of Nicea (325 C.E.) and Constantinople (381 C.E.). Today, it seems that doubters, seekers, and fewer and fewer of the faithful really "believe" what they're saying. Looking into the congregation from my vantage point I notice maybe a third of the lips in my parish are locked when we come to the Nicene Creed.

Creed: *credo* (first word of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds); to believe, trust, entrust; 1 : a brief authoritative formula of religious belief; 2 : a set of fundamental beliefs; *also* : a guiding principle (*Webster's Ninth*). In sum, "creeds are statements about our basic beliefs about God" (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 851).

A bit of history: Traditionally Christianity boasts three creeds: Apostles, Athanasian, and Nicene. The Apostles' Creed, the earliest, is first found in the *Interrogatory Creed of Hippolytus* in 215 C.E.. The form widely used today comes from the writings of *Caesarius of Arles* who died in 542 C.E.. This Creed was and is used in the Baptismal rite as a summary statement of Christian doctrine. Though ascribed to the apostles, it certainly was created much later, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century at the earliest. The Apostles' Creed describes God as Creator, tells of Jesus as God's only son (though it does not claim Jesus as God!), and affirms the Holy Spirit.

In 312 C.E., the night before the Battle of Milvian Bridge in Italy, Emperor Constantine is reported to have had a dream in which he was told to paint the Cross of Christ on his soldiers' shields. "By this sign you will be victor." And, Constantine was victorious that day. Though not baptized himself until a few hours before his death in 337 C.E., as emperor he ordered that Christianity become the religion of the realm. There are many reasons for this other than religious. Most are about political expediency, power, and control.

At Constantine's bidding, the year 325 C.E. saw a council of bickering bishops gather in Nicea to settle once and for all the question of Jesus' humanity versus his divinity. Orthodoxy, since Jesus' death and still strong in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, celebrated Jesus as son of God and an extraordinary human being, but not as part of the Godhead. An Egyptian priest named Arius articulated this view and most bishops and priests agreed with him. Athanasius, also an Egyptian, claimed Jesus was divine, of the same substance and being as God (*homoousios* in Greek). The fight was nasty and it lasted years. Thousands of people were killed. The Athanasian Creed is Bishop Athanasius' own proclamation of what orthodoxy *should* be. The Nicene Creed, a compromise creed, was at first accepted in 325 C.E.

at Nicea, but then rejected, only to be re-institutionalized by a later council in Constantinople in 381 C.E., which is when “Jesus finally became God”. (See *When Jesus Became God* by Richard E. Rubenstein, Harcourt, 1999, for details about this fascinating controversy.)

So, what do I believe? How can I lead a congregation in reciting the creed Sunday after Sunday? Regarding the second question, I do so because I honor and respect those for whom the creeds are meaningful. One of my pastoral responsibilities is to care for all of my parishioners. As a follower of Jesus I am open to all people where ever they are and always inclusive. I will be honest about my own beliefs even as I accept the different theological experiences and beliefs of others.

My own beliefs have not so much evolved as lurched. In the naïveté of my pre-seminary days, I didn’t think much about the meaning of “the words I was saying.” Was I supposed to? But when I looked closely at the creeds from an academic and religious perspective, I needed to confront myself with a stark reality: These things are not literally true. They can’t be. I don’t really believe them. So, what to do with the creeds?

This is where I lurched forward. I soothed myself by considering the creeds in their historical context. I now understand where they are coming from. These ideas were invented by and for the church. History reports that sectarian and church politics were at work in their creation and the stakes for Side A verses Side B were high. Tradition says that the creed developed at Nicea states a minimal Christian belief. Perhaps at the time that was true. Today, I recite them as an historic document but understand them only as metaphor. The creed as metaphor may inspire some, who would otherwise bolt from the church in protest, to continue standing in the tension between the tradition and the future.

As with understanding the gospels, the creed is far more powerful and effective pointing to the ineffability of divine spirit than it is precisely describing it. I am suspicious of religious people who claim

the absolute truth and can package it neatly. Yet, I am incredibly inspired by God as Creator of all that is, by the revelation of God's compassion, forgiveness, justice and love in life of Jesus of Nazareth, and by the immanence of Spirit in life and human relationships. These things I do believe.

Much of the issue surrounding the creed's usefulness, I think, has to do with inertia. To my way of thinking, inertia is often far more dangerous than change. In the life of the church today, is the creed then a liability? In other words, what should the Church do with the creeds in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? I think there is a real choice, especially in order to attract people to worship who are unimpressed with the absolutism of knee-jerk Bible-belt Christianity and dogmatic Roman Catholicism. On the one hand, "Come on down and we'll tell you exactly what's what, how to pray and when to pay. You want comfort and security? We've got both plus the answers to all your questions about God, Jesus, Heaven, and Hell."

On the other, "The doors are open to all. Come in with your questions and doubts, past religious experiences, hopes, fears, love, and compassion. There's work to do. Here, have some bread and some wine before you go home to give away Christ's Grace and Love, to seek Justice, and to fill the world with Peace." The creed plays well in the first example, not so well in the second.

Do we need these old creeds at all? Should a new creed be written? What to do with the creed depends a lot on whether or not you're committed to an old paradigm of the Church, Faith, the Bible, God, and Jesus or an emerging paradigm as Marcus Borg describes in *The Heart of Christianity*. Retired Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, in *Why the Church Must Change or Die*, argues for real systemic and institutional change for the Church, including the creeds.

In these days the Episcopal Church and the world-wide Anglican communion are struggling with issues around homosexuality. I think wrestling with questions about the creed would be far more useful, interesting, helpful, and productive. One of the most common

workshop exercises for church people is to write a personal creed. Many of these are exceptional insights into where and how God is revealed in life. Or, how about if we simply jettison the creeds as outdated and return to the earliest days of Christianity when people were held together by the communion of bread and wine and reaching out with compassion and justice to those less fortunate? Now that's something I can say I believe in.