

Credo: I Believe in the Holy Spirit

January 30, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

John 14:17-21, 25-27

So today we are continuing in our series titled “Credo,” – the Latin word for “I believe,” where we are looking at some of our core beliefs as Christians, through the lens of the Apostles’ Creed. We started two weeks ago with a conversation about God the Father, and then last week, God the Son. And this week, we are rounding out the Holy Trinity as we turn to a conversation on God the Holy Spirit.

I think probably for most of us, if we look at the three persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit might be the one that we tend to understand the least. The Spirit is hard to picture. We can picture an almighty Father, most of us having had fathers or father figures in our lives. And when we think about the work of creation there are images that jump into our minds – pictures of the earth and the sky and sea and plants and animals and humans.

We can picture Jesus, because he was a historical figure. A human being who lived and breathed and walked on the earth, and we know what that looks like. Jesus was all about making God present and real and tangible for us, a God that we could see and interact with.

But the Holy Spirit – that’s a little fuzzier. We know that somehow the Spirit is active and alive and moving and breathing and working within and among us, and we may see the fruits of that, but because we can’t see the Spirit with our own eyes it is harder to wrap our minds around who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does. And it’s probably for this reason that when we pray, most of us generally don’t address our prayers to Spirit. We pray to “God,” or to “Father” or “Heavenly Father,” or to “Jesus,” we may pray that God would send his spirit, but praying to the Spirit directly...at least for the typical United Methodist, is pretty rare.

- When we think about the Holy Spirit we may think of the image of a dove, remembering the story of Jesus’ baptism when the Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove and a voice from heaven called out, “This is my son, the beloved. With him I am well-pleased”.
- Or we may think of fire, remembering the story of Pentecost when what looked like tongues of fire rained down from heaven and separated, coming to rest on all the people.
- In the Old Testament, the word for Spirit was the Hebrew word *Ruach* which is the same word also used for wind, breath, even in some instances, life. So when God breathed into Adam the breath of life, God was breathing into him not just the breath that could physically allow him to live and breathe, but also the spirit of God that would sustain life. Every breath we take is a gift of the Spirit of God.

- And that understanding of spirit as wind or breath didn't change much in the New Testament, where the Greek word for Spirit is *Pneuma*. Again, breath, spirit, wind, life. It's no accident that on the day of Pentecost they heard a sound like the rush of a violent wind. There was something in their midst that was moving, and that something was moving them too, blowing them off-course.

So despite these powerful visuals it may still be a little bit challenging for us to wrap our minds around the Holy Spirit, but that has not kept the church throughout the centuries from spending a lot of time fighting about the Spirit. There have even been major church splits over questions about who the Spirit is, the most notable being the Great Schism in the year 1054 when the eastern church (which would become the Orthodox Church) split from the western church (which would become the Roman Catholic Church) over several things, one of the most notable being a tiny, little short 3-word phrase in the Nicene Creed, relating specifically to the Holy Spirit.

So because I just can't help myself, here's what happened. Your weekly dose of church history, with a little Trinitarian theology thrown in.

So, roundabout the 4th Century A.D., as the church was growing and different heresies were cropping up all over the place – heresies like Arianism, and Apollinarianism, and Eutychianism, and Nestorianism – the heresies that we explored a little bit last week that all pertained to who Jesus is and how Jesus is related to God the Father, the church basically got together to put together a unified document outlining the core of what we believe. This document was called the Nicene Creed. And what they basically did was took the words of the Apostles' Creed, and expanded on them. Fleshed out certain parts that they believed needed more explanation.

And so, for example, in the section talking about Jesus, the Nicene Creed says that Jesus was "Eternally begotten of the Father. God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made."

- So Jesus is fully-God, co-eternal with the Father, and yet begotten of the Father. So in a way, coming from the Father while existing eternally with the Father. A weird paradox, and somewhat confusing, but there we have it.

And then the third paragraph pertains to the Holy Spirit.

- Originally, in the earliest versions of the Nicene Creed, there wasn't much said about the Holy Spirit, but over time it was fleshed out to talk about the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the other persons of the Trinity:
- "We believe in the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father. Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified..."
- So just like Jesus comes from the Father, while still being fully God, the Spirit also proceeds from the Father and is worshipped and glorified along with both the Father and the Son, the Spirit also being fully God.

- So we have here a sort of hierarchy of the members of the Trinity.
- But somewhere along the line the little phrase “and the Son” was added: “Who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.”
This sparked a lot of controversy, over the role of Jesus in the procession of the Holy Spirit. On one hand, Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Spirit,” as noted before his birth, and “filled with the Holy Spirit” as was noted at his baptism. But on the other hand, as is noted in our scripture reading this morning, the Spirit is essentially a continuation of Jesus’ presence in the world. So who does the Spirit come from? The Father? The Son? Both?
- Ultimately the church couldn’t agree, and in the year 1054 the church split. And to this day the Catholic Church and Protestant churches in the West include the phrase “and the Son” in their version of the Nicene Creed, and Orthodox churches do not.

So that was by far the most dramatic split over the Holy Spirit, but in more recent years we have seen other church denominations and independent churches split and splinter off of more mainline denominations, primarily over a concern that the Holy Spirit doesn’t get enough emphasis.

And so in the early 1900s we saw an emergence of Pentecostal Churches, who placed a huge emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, most notably the speaking in tongues. And the practice of speaking in tongues prompted its own debates and controversies, but by that time the church was already so fragmented and divided into different sects and denominations and independent churches, the impact of those controversies was much less.

Ok. Church history lesson done.

So let’s take a look at the Creed and what it is we say we believe about the Holy Spirit. The full text of the Apostles’ Creed is up on the screen in a miniscule font size, so if you would like to follow along, it is on page 882 of your hymnals.

The creed is written in three parts, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” Pretty straightforward.

Then we move into the second paragraph, which we explored last week. “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only son, our Lord...” and then we move into a brief summary of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. A summary that makes up more than half the creed.

And then we get to the last paragraph, which is really quite interesting. It’s like a laundry list of other things that there wasn’t time to mention, beginning with “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” That’s it. Nothing about what the Spirit does, how the Spirit acts in this world. God the Father Almighty was the creator of heaven and earth. Jesus Christ gets

more than half of the Creed to himself, talking about the work of redemption. But God the Spirit? I believe in the Holy Spirit, as an afterthought, before we move on to other things: the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

But maybe that's the whole point. What if the writers of the creed intended to say that the work of the Holy Spirit *is* all these other things. **The holy catholic church.** It is the Spirit who births the church and brings us all, in our varied lives and worldviews, to the table so that we can all speak together the common language of faith. **The communion of saints.** It is the Spirit who draws us together as a community, and binds us together with all the people through the centuries, all the saints who have come before us and those who will come after us. **The forgiveness of sins.** It is the Spirit who is at work within us, bringing us to a place of repentance and forgiveness, and then moving us onward from there so that we can encounter God more and more fully through our lives. **The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.** It is the Spirit who continues to work within us that we ourselves might experience eternal life.

So in essence, while we may tend to forget about the Spirit and ignore the Spirit in our prayers, and not be able to wrap our minds around a helpful image of the Spirit, it is the Spirit who is God at work in our everyday, moment-to-moment lives. The Spirit is the one who is charged with our laundry lists, with the fragmented pieces of our lives that don't get a space anywhere else. The Spirit is the one who dwells within us, giving us the strength to face the tasks of the day, giving us wisdom for our interactions with one another, giving us clarity about ourselves and convicting us of our deep need for God. The Spirit is God with whom we most actively interact.

In our scripture reading this morning Jesus has gathered with his disciples for the Passover feast, and has just washed the disciples' feet, and then he launches into a long speech. It feels almost like Jesus is preaching his final sermon, trying to sum up the most important things that he wants the disciples to "get," to internalize, before he leaves them for good. And nestled into all of the goodness of what Jesus shares with the disciples is this sweet passage.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father to give you another advocate, to be with you forever. Someone else, who lives and breathes and moves and loves, but does not have flesh and blood and so will never die. I am not going to be here forever, Jesus is saying. I will soon be leaving you. But I am not leaving you orphaned. Because God's Spirit, my Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, will be in you. Will abide with you. People won't be able to see this Spirit, or recognize the Spirit for what it is, but you will know him, because you know me. And this Spirit is me, but inside of you.

And then I love this next part: *"In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."* So because of the Holy Spirit, we are not just

forever in the presence of God, but we are intertwined with God. We are wrapped up with God. Just as God is in us, we are in God. The lines between heaven and earth are blurred. The divide between divinity and humanity isn't as clear as it once was. We are being woven into the life of God, and because of that, life will never be the same again.

Because we are not alone. We are accompanied by God himself, breathing in and through us. Descending upon us and claiming us, marking us as God's own. Resting upon us and igniting us, breaking down the boundaries between us and giving the gift of understanding. And blowing us off-course, moving us outside of ourselves so that we can join together with God as the boundaries of earth and heaven are blurred and the kingdom of God comes alive again, today, in this world.

So through the Holy Spirit living within us, may the Lord take our minds and think through them...