

## **Credo: I Believe in Jesus**

January 23, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **1 John 4:7-16**

So, for those of who were not with us last week – or for those of you who were, but who have slept since then...we started a new sermon series titled “Credo,” which is the Latin word for “I believe,” where we are going to be spending the next several weeks looking at the words of the Apostles’ Creed and relating those ancient, more-than-2000-year-old words to our day-to-day lives today.

We learned last week that the Apostles’ Creed was originally used as a statement of personal faith, most commonly in early Christian baptisms, as a way to say “as I am getting ready to make a massive life change and order my life after God, here is what I believe to be most true about the God who I plan to spend the rest of my life serving.” And then, as life goes on and life’s twists and turns come, the Apostles’ Creed continues to stand as a kind of touchstone. We turn back to it again and again, as a way to say “even through life’s weirdest and most challenging struggles; in the face of everything that life throws at me, I believe. I believe in God. I believe in Jesus. I believe in the Holy Spirit. And because I believe in God, I know that I have the strength to keep going.

We also took a little look last week at some of the other ancient creeds – creeds like the Nicene Creed, written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by a group that was doing their darndest to try to fight against ancient heresies that were beginning to run rampant in the church. And most of those heresies had their roots in the section of the creed that we are camping out in today – the second statement of belief. After “I believe in God,” we move to “I believe in Jesus.” Or, in the words of the Apostles’ Creed:

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son our Lord.*

But then the creed goes on. Because evidently, there was maybe a little bit of confusion about Jesus. This is, BY FAR, the longest section of the creed.

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son our Lord.*

*Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,*

*born of the virgin Mary,*

*suffered under Pontius Pilate,*

*was crucified, dead, and buried.*

*The third day he rose from the dead,*

*he ascended into heaven,*

*and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*

*From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

Of the 105 words in the Apostles’ Creed, 65 of them are dedicated to fleshing out who this Jesus is.

And there is a really big reason for that. From the very beginning, there has been a lot of confusion around Jesus. Who is Jesus? Is Jesus God? Is Jesus a human being? Is Jesus part god and part human? Was he really born? Did he really die? What about these weird things like the virgin birth, and the resurrection? The things that make us suspend scientific belief for a little while in favor of a belief in divine miracles. How does all of this fit together?

And these questions didn't go away. They stuck around for hundreds of years. Thousands, even. And people would do whatever they could to try to explain some of these questions away, and they really did not do a good job of it, and that's where we started to get some pretty common early church heresies emerging. Heresies like:

- **Arianism.** A man named Arius and his followers believed that Jesus was not, in fact, God. But that Jesus was created by God, just like you or I were created by God. God created Jesus to be more than just a human, but he was certainly not on par with God the Father.
- **Apollinarianism.** Apollinarius believed that Jesus had a human body, but his spirit was God. So basically he was God dressed up like a human for Halloween. He looked like you or me, but on the inside he really wasn't anything like you or me because his spirit, his thoughts, his emotions, his very soul – those were not human at all.
  - Later a man named Eutyches took this a step further with the heresy **Eutychianism**, in which he believed that because Jesus's spirit was totally and completely divine, there is no way that Jesus could identify with you or me in our humanity. When Jesus was led into the desert and tempted by the devil, he wasn't actually tempted at all, because Jesus could not be tempted, because God cannot be tempted.
- **Nestorianism.** This one is a little more confusing – Nestorius believed that God actually had two sons – one was human, and the other was divine. And both of God's sons lived together in the person of Jesus. So, it was almost like Jesus had a split personality.

These were the major heresies that the church dealt with early on, but they were not the only ones out there. And in our scripture reading today, we find the writer of 1 John battling with a whole different crop of heresies – but again, dealing with Jesus and who Jesus is.

The biggest one for the writer of 1 John was a heresy known as "**Docetism**," which was later adopted and re-purposed to form the belief system known as "**Gnosticism**."

In Docetism it is believed that Jesus didn't actually have a real human body, but just a "pretend" one, or a "phantom" one. It looked real, it felt real, it acted real, but it wasn't real. Jesus' body was just an illusion. And because of this, Jesus couldn't be born, he couldn't suffer, and he certainly couldn't die.

Then later, the Gnostics came in and took that belief a step further. In Gnosticism, they believed that everything that exists as matter is inherently evil, and everything that exists as spirit is inherently good. So everything we can see, feel, touch, and taste? Everything that God created and declared “this is good?” It’s actually bad. And our whole goal in life is to escape all of that and enter into the realm of the spirit world. And we do that through a special knowledge that God only gives to some of us.

And so the writer of 1, 2, and 3 John writes these three short letters in essence to say, “Don’t follow these false teachers, because what they are teaching you is not true. All that which God created is not evil. Jesus isn’t just some weird hologram or illusion. Jesus was really here. Jesus was really real. Jesus was really born. He was really human, he really suffered, and he really died. And also – Jesus is really God. God really came to walk among us. And through Jesus, God is really about the work of redeeming us.”

And furthermore...we don’t come to know and understand God by rejecting everything and everyone and seeking some mysterious “special knowledge” that God has only given to some of us. We come to know God, John writes in our scripture today, by one thing, and one thing only: love.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God, and knows God. Everyone who does not love, does not know God, for God is love.”

So basically, the only way that we can come to know God is through love. But then, John takes it a step further and tells us that the love that is really most important here is not the love that we have for God, but the love that God has for us. God goes first in this act of love. Every. Single. Time. From the love out of which we were created, to the love through which we are redeemed, to the love that sustains us our whole entire lives – that love is a free gift of God, made most evident in the gift of Jesus, God’s Son, who loved us enough to give himself up for us.

That is a powerful depth of love that we could never match, but that John calls us to emulate. “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

In other words, this is a kind of love that should *change* us. Jesus should *change* us.

Does it matter whether Jesus is fully God and fully human, or whether he is some kind of weird hybrid mix – a human with a divine soul, or a God-man with a split personality, or a spirit with a body that’s just an illusion? Well...yes, those things do matter. But not nearly so much as the central message that Jesus came to offer: God is a God of love. God abides in us, long before we ever decide to abide in God. God lives within us, whether we ever come to see and recognize that or not. God loves us, even if we never choose to love God or love one another in return. The love of God, the love of Jesus, the

love of the Holy Spirit – that is *paramount*. That’s where it all starts, and that’s where it all ends.

Here’s how important this theme of love is to the writer of 1 John. This short letter is just 5 chapters long. In those 5 chapters, the word “love” appears 46 times. Of those 46 instances, almost *half* of them appear in our scripture reading today, as John is trying to flesh out for us the nature of who God is.

“I believe in Jesus,” the creed reminds us. “I believe in all these things about Jesus. For the next 65 words, I am going to expound upon everything that I believe to be true about Jesus, and his life, and his death and his resurrection.”

But the writer of 1 John cuts through all of that. “Let me make this as simple as I possibly can,” he is saying to us. “I believe that Jesus came because God loves us. And because God wants to be in relationship with us. And because God wants us to abide in him, as he already abides in us. God wants us to live in relationship with him, just as he already lives in relationship with us. And to make this relationship happen, because his love for us is so deep, God sent Jesus to set us free from our sin and our brokenness and our dysfunction and all those things that separate us from God, and to restore us to life. Life forever spent with this God of radical, over-the-top, move-heaven-and-earth love.

It is not a love just for some of us. It’s a love meant for all of us.

It’s not a love just for the most “spiritual” or the “holiest” among us. It’s a love meant for *all* of us.

It’s not a love just for those who think they possess a special “knowledge” or think they have a special relationship with God. It’s a love meant for *all of us*.

All of us who are messy, all of us who make mistakes, all of us who lash out in anger, all of us who push other people’s buttons, all of us who sometimes doubt, or question, the presence of God in our lives. *All of us*.

And so, my friends, the invitation today is for all of us: May we come to know Jesus not just in the words printed on a 2,000-year-old page, but in the dynamic relationship of love that those very same words reveal. May we come to know the stories of Jesus as our own story – the story of a God who burst open time and space and broke all the laws of physics and biology for no other reason than that this God wants us to know him more deeply. May we discover in the person of Jesus a love like no other. And may this powerful, unstoppable love change us, from the inside-out.