

Bar Harbor Congregational Church Sermon
by Rev. Rob Benson
April 3, 2016

Crossed Fingers

God of overflowing grace move among us all now. May my words and our hearts be open to your Grace. Amen.

Some of you have picked up already that it is Holy Humor Day or Holy Hilarity Day. I thought this was kind of like an imposed thing, like a Hallmark thing, You know like “National Left-Handed People’s Day” or something like that but apparently it isn't. Apparently it’s a real thing. It has its origins in the Eastern Orthodox Church. At Easter it says God had the last laugh over sin and death. So the Sunday after Easter is the time to celebrate that victory and that joy. So apparently it's a *thing*.

What kind of man was Boaz before he married Ruth?
Ruthless.

How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb? By the way some of you might not know that’s my wife over there (pointing to the liturgist) and so if there’s a little extra dynamic here, that’s why. And she’s Lutheran! And UCC . . . it’s complicated. So how many Lutherans to change a lightbulb?

We believe the lightbulb will be changed by faith, not by any works that we do.

So Happy Holy Humor Sunday. Anyone have any church jokes you’d like to share?
(A joke is shared.)
O.K., enough of that!

So we’re actually not going to do Holy Humor Sunday all day today but you might have guessed teasing through other parts of our service that we want to talk a little bit about the creeds. Historically, creeds are both testimony of faith and a test of faith. I remember it was probably in middle school the first time someone admitted to me that they didn't believe everything that was in the Apostles Creed. They said it every week during worship and they just crossed their fingers when they came to the parts that they had trouble with. To this day I still admire their honesty as I admire the courage and hunger of poor doubting Thomas. As today’s silent reflection said it should mean something to believe that Christ arose. Ever since, I’ve viewed the historic creeds of the church with a certain amount of suspicion. For me, they’re wordy which betrays their having been written by committee. More importantly, if people don't really believe it, why do they recite it week after week? Some would say, *Well, because they are not really Christian*. Fair enough. Maybe. But my hope or my suspicion is that faith rests more in the grace of God than in the park-your-mind-at-the-door ascent to correct propositions.

So when the topic of creeds came up recently, I thought it might be time for us to take a fresh look. Somehow there is a great irony of this desire to talk about creeds and it falling on Holy Humor Sunday because they really don't necessarily mesh well together

the Nicene and the Apostles Creeds serve essentially two functions: to identify the content of the Christian faith and to establish a Christian theological identity distinct from the various philosophies or heresies coursing through the early church. Under the heading of what we believe, there's two emphases, the what and the we. The earliest creeds took earliest scriptural teachings and adapted them for use in corporate worship. The old Roman symbol became the Apostles Creed sometime between the 2nd and 4th centuries. It's still widely used today.

When Christianity became the religion of Imperial Rome in the 4th century, official teachings mediated passionate theological disputes. The first major theological problem in early Christianity concerned the nature of the Trinity, how God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit relate with one another. Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria and one of his priests, Arius, led opposing camps with divergent views on whether Christ existed eternally along with God or if Christ was born from God. Christ would then be a subordinate member of the Trinity.

At the Council of Nicaea, the two sides argued and debated for about two months with each using scriptures to justify their positions. Eventually the majority adopted the earliest version of the Nicene Creed which reads in part: *We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God, begotten of the Father, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father . . .* and because they were concerned that everyone had this right understanding, they added an anathema --now that is a fun word. You can take it home and apply to most any situation—An anathema that reads this: Those who say there was a time when Christ was not, and he was not before he was made, and he was made out of nothing, or he is of another substance or essence, or the son of God is created or changeable or alterable, they are condemned.

Ah, but what about the Holy Spirit, you might ask. Great question! This led to the Council of Nicaea part two in 381. They added: And we believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, the Giver of Life who proceeds from the Father, who was with the Father and the Son together, is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. The Nicene Creed, largely unchanged from 381, remains the most widely-accepted Christian statement of belief.

There's a lot to it. It's a mouthful. I'll invite you to check it out when you go home. Perhaps there are in it elements that while rooted in orthodoxy Christian faith are also rooted in the theological controversies of the early church. And there might be elements that are hard for us to breathe on our own today. If you look at the Nicene Creed and you find yourself crossing your fingers at some point take notice of that. If creeds are both testimony and tests of authentic faith, that's the trick today. There's a sense of threat or if you harbor some doubts about any of the propositions you're not really on the team. Best just to cross your fingers and carry on.

Now perhaps you know that our denomination—the United Church of Christ—describes

itself as a non-creedal church, seeking a balance between individual freedom of conscience (you don't have to cross your fingers) and expressions of faith throughout the ages. The UCC embraces the theological heritage that affirms the Bible as the authoritative witness to the Word of God: the creeds of the ecumenical councils and the confessions of the Reformation. It (He?) goes on to say that we seek a balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith. We receive the the historic creeds and confessions as testimonies but not tests of faith.

We read the statement of faith just a few minutes ago. The first one was written in 1959 shortly after the United Church of Christ was formed. It was intended to give some content to the faith of this newly formed denomination. The version we read today was the revised version from 1981. It notably changed the third person references *God* and sometimes *He* to the second person *you*—you created worlds. In a similar move to what most versions of the 23rd Psalm do as well. Not just the Lord is my shepherd.

For many this statement of faith is a more modern, more accessible alternative, an expression of the basic tenets of Christianity. For others it can feel like it imposes either an ascent to beliefs that they some struggle with or an implicit test of authentic faith even if it claims otherwise. I remember when I first read “*You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.*” That sounded compelling and fresh, the beginning of an interesting conversation. At the same time there's a part of me perhaps not my best part (but it's there anyway) that rebels at having to fit into a narrow definition of faith.

There was one time about 20 years ago when I was looking over an application for a summer ministry internship and it said *describe your faith journey* and gave you a line and a half. Just enough room to write *Jesus Christ is my personal Lord and Savior*. Sometimes people ask---well, maybe they don't ask me as much anymore---but they used to ask if I'm a Christian. And when they did I was worried that really what they were saying was, *Are you a Christian in the way that I think being a Christian means?* Maybe you get asked that question, too. *Do you go to church? Are you a Christian?* By the way, the best answer I've ever heard is attributed to Kierkegaard: *I'm trying to be.*

I worry that a statement or a creed is more about establishing an identity distinct from others who believe differently or wrongly than about expressing one's own grounding in the love, joy, and service of God. I get worried that any creed or statement of faith presumes answers and sidesteps questions and that the discussion around faith is somehow already complete. Christ didn't seem to slap Thomas for his skepticism but engaged and loved him into redemption and joy.

Now to us. We haven't read either of these historic creeds or the statement of faith in worship until today---at least us, including me. What do you think? Does it sing of our union with men and women across our denominational spectrum and even from centuries ago? Does it delineate lines in the sand that underline our correctness and alienate their faith expressions? Does it raise questions for you or make you want to cross your fingers? Does it breathe God's grace? I pray that it does and if so we should

say it together more often. Talk to one another about this. Talk to me. Be honest and share how reciting it affects you, what challenges you, what comforts you. Now you might ask why does it matter? I think it matters a lot today when drawing lines marking who's in and who's out carries dire consequences and threatens humanity's survival. Today when exclusive laws and careless words stoke fear and incite violence. We should realize if we haven't already that what we say matters. To me the question is more *what **do** you believe* than *do you believe what I think you should*. The answers are far more interesting. I might even say they are illuminating. One thing that might agree on is that God's grace seeks us even while we wander and wonder and cross our fingers; that we may understand Eucharist or it may completely allude us. But either way, God is here. Christ is here. The Spirit accompanies us to this table of reconciliation where all is made new. So we come to this table not because we must, but because we may. We come not because we're strong but because we are weak. We come not because you have any claim on heaven's reward but because we stand in constant need of God's mercy and help. We come not to testify that we are righteous but that we love Jesus and desire to be His disciple. We come not to express an opinion but to seek a presence and to pray for His spirit. Christ said come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Jesus said put your finger here and see my hands, reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe. Amen.