

## Sermon: October 10, 2021

### “The God of St. Francis”

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Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5, Matthew 6:25-34

Justo L. Gonzalez tells a story in his book, *The Apostle's Creed for Today*, in which he describes a young Orthodox priest's discussion with his spiritual advisor about some trouble he was having with the Nicene Creed—specifically that there were parts of it he did not believe. “Recite it anyhow,” he advised.

The young man came back after a few days, again declaring that he could not in good conscience claim to believe all that the Creed said.

“Recite it anyhow,” the older man insisted.

This went on for several weeks, until finally, exasperated and confused, the young priest asked, “Why do you insist I repeat the Creed, when you know there are in it some phrases I don't really believe?”

To which the elderly adviser replied, “Because it is not *your* creed. It is the Creed of the church. When you recite it, you are not directly saying what *you* believe. You are declaring what *the church* believes. And you are declaring yourself part of the church, no matter whether you believe every point of doctrine or not.”

I tell you this story because for the next 6 weeks, we will be talking a bit about another Creed of the church, The Apostle's Creed. Before we embark on this journey, I have to be very up front with all of you: I was not raised in a credal church. I've spoken before about how I church-hopped as

a child with my family and so my spiritual formation, especially my Christian formation, looks much different than many of the members of this church. So, while the Creed is popular among many here who were raised with it, it is not necessarily something all Christians know. It's not even something that is important to every Christian. The reciting of this creed wasn't done by the apostles and nowhere does Jesus mention it. We say The Lord's Prayer because it was Jesus's prayer, it's in scripture, but the creeds are not. Not directly. The young priest in our story above struggled with the Nicene Creed because there were parts of it that no longer fit his faith development. They no longer held resonance or complete truth in his perspective. His belief had evolved, likely as a result of his experience in life and his experience of God. We all have different lived realities. We all have different experiences of God because God meets us where we are. It's one of the reasons I think it's so important that we, as a church, meet people where they are.

And because we have different experiences, we will necessarily see some things differently. No two people interpret everything about scripture the same way because we all bring things to that text. We all have baggage, so-to-speak. I would go so far as to say that, if we're honest with ourselves in our scriptural study, there's probably no two times in our own lives when we interpret the scriptures exactly the same—because we change. We should change. We should grow. If we don't, we're probably not living our lives. Our experiences of life and of God change us. What I believe now has drastically changed from what I believed when I was 10 or 18 or even 30.

The first words of the Apostle's Creed are "I believe," which, in and of itself, is a full statement. When we think about what we believe, it's important to think deeply about not just the "what" of belief, but the "why." Why do we believe what we believe? It's the question the young priest was asking and it's one we should all always be checking in with ourselves about. The reason we are spending so much time on the Creed is because I want us all to think deeply about our faith and about what we say we believe. I don't want us to recite the Creed absentmindedly from memory because we learned it when we were a certain age or because we feel we must. I want us to *think* about what we profess. It's important that we do.

We tend to think that Creeds were designed to summarize or offer a recap of universal Christian doctrine, but that's not true. Their primary purpose was to affirm the Trinitarian belief, that God is three in one. The creeds also tended to be the result of disagreements over parts of Christian doctrine. Formulated to bolster the arguments of the victors of battles between great historical Christian thinkers. And when I say battles, I mean that quite literally as, in the case of the Council of Nicaea, in which some accounts tell us that the fight over doctrine was so heated between early church fathers that Nicholas of Myra struck Arius across the face.

The passion these men felt about their beliefs is not foreign to us. There's a reason why Linus proclaims in *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, that there are three things he never discusses with other people: religion, politics, and The Great Pumpkin. As a pastor, I am sometimes on the receiving end of passionate... shall we call them... expressions of dissatisfaction with various parts of worship. Sometimes it's the prayers. Sometimes it's the sermon. Sometimes I didn't choose the right hymns.

Recently, it's been mentioned a few times that perhaps in recent years and months the church hasn't said the Creed enough. So, I thought, let's talk about it.

I'll be delving into more of the history of the Apostle's Creed as we move through the next six weeks, but today in order not to bore everyone to tears, let's jump right in. Now, the creed, itself, has three primary sections: one which discusses God as creator, the second Jesus the son, and the third section the Holy Spirit. Today, we'll begin our discussion by talking about God, the creator. Why do I say God, the creator and not God, the Father, as the Creed tells us? Because scripture tells us that God is not just Father. When we try to name God by one single name, we put God in a very small box, we miss the complexities of not just God, but also the rich, descriptive language of the authors of scripture who imagined God as Father, and midwife (Psalms), comforting mother (Isaiah), Ultimate being (Exodus), consuming fire (Hebrews), mother hen (Matthew), shepherd (Luke), protector, guide, teacher, our strength, refuge, beloved, blessed, etc. Whenever we think we've found the ultimate way to define God, we can be sure our imaginations have come up short because God is so big and vast and loving and good and infinite that our finite, human minds cannot possibly imagine the boundless wonder that is the Almighty Holy One.

In this one place, I think the Creed falls short—in limiting God to one gender, we miss so much about the innumerable ways in which humankind has experienced God throughout the course of time. There are people who have been hurt by their fathers, who have no father, whose relationship with men has been so harmful that God defined solely as Father is an

anathema to their very existence. We need to remember that God is beyond all of our conceptions of gender – God is not human, God is beyond human. Beyond animal. Beyond earthling. Beyond all that is. If you understand God as Father and that is comforting for you, that's great, but I would invite you to be open to remembering God as so much bigger and more wondrous than that single descriptor can sum up.

So if you hear Pastor Jessica say the Creed and she says, "God – the creator – almighty..." please understand that I do this because I do not wish to place a box around my understanding of God, it is not because I object to the Creed or the saying of it, it is not because I find it offensive that you experience God as a loving Father. It is simply that I experience God differently and wish to remain open to the great and powerful mystery of God the creator.

Sister Joan Chitister writes in her book, *In Search of Belief*, "We need language that gives us a fuller picture of the God who birthed us. Then, the world will be a softer, safer place and God a God big enough to be worthy of belief."

In fact, God is so big and vast that the Apostle's creed simplifies its statement on God, homing in specifically on one of God's primary actions or roles or aspects, that is, God as maker of heaven and earth. God as creator of all that is, and was, and is to come. God, who made us in God's image, and at the same time, who made all things that grow, walk, crawl, slither, fly, or swim. The waters, the rocks, the dirt, and mountains. The planets. The galaxies. God created it all.

The two creation stories in Genesis, whether you take them as literal or not, give us ultimately the image of a benevolent Creator God who lovingly made all that is and who called that creation “good.” Proclaiming God as creator is a vital step in our spiritual growth. It reminds us of the gift that life is and if a gift, one given by God, then it also reminds us of our responsibility in the grand scheme of things, that we are to love and honor life in all its forms. Not just life in the form of a child in the womb, but also in the form of the child who is born and hungry. The child who is born and unloved. The child who is born and a refugee. The child who is born and a member of the LGBTQ community. The child who is born and black. The child who is born and not American. The child who is born and is different. More than that, we have a responsibility to love the life that surrounds us and is not human. To be kind to the creatures we share this world with and care for the created natural world that underlies everything we do.

Monday was the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, the saint most known and loved for his reverence for the natural world and for all creatures great and small. This saint of the church is beloved for his role in reminding us that all life was lovingly created by the Almighty, powerful Father, Mother, Shepherd, Protector, Beloved, Blessed God. If Mary Magdalene is my favorite saint, then Francis runs a narrowly close second in my heart because of his reverence for the abundant gift of which we have been called to be good stewards. This is a charge given to the first humans created in the image of God. To care for the gift of creation as God cares for it.

In fact, we were not called to subdue God’s created world or to run roughshod over what God has called good. We were not called to abuse

and lay waste to, to use callously and with impunity, to bend nature to our will—no. We would do well to remember that, while we were born with the ability to reason and manipulate, we are called to humility, to live harmoniously with the magnificent gift of creation. Psalm 90 calls us back to humility “before the mountains were born, before you birthed earth and the inhabited world, from forever in the past to forever in the future you are God,” the Psalmist writes, “You return people to dust saying, ‘Go back, humans,’ because in your perspective a thousand years are like yesterday past, like a short period during the night watch. You sweep humans away like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning.”

Our lives, our work, our calling, our stewardship and the finite nature of it, the limits of the bodies we’ve been given remind us that we are not almighty, we are not all-powerful, we are not eternal as God is, all-wise, all-knowing, holy, and completely just. But we can be a version of humankind that is so much more than we are. We can live more fully into the image of God, the example given in Jesus Christ, the movement of the Holy Spirit within us. We can be so much more than we allow ourselves to be.

In the story I told the children today, St. Francis rescued not just the people of the village terrorized by the wolf of Gubbio, but also the wolf, himself. He saw the possibilities and felt the responsibility to seek harmony with all that God has created. He went into the woods unsure of the reception he would receive, but certain that God had given him the gifts to see him and the townspeople and the wolf through this terrible situation. As Jesus reminds us in the scripture from Matthew today, all that worry will ultimately amount to nothing. Armed with his faith in the gifts of God and his belief in the value of the natural world and call to be a good and faithful steward, Brother

Francis approached the wolf in humility and, at seeing a hint of aggression in the wolf called for peace and sought understanding. In doing so, he brought about a lasting peace between humankind and the wild.

We should be following that example. Jesus said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." Or, as my Donna likes to remind me all the time, "Worry in order." Francis saw that he could go and talk to the wolf to sort out the situation *today*. And that's what he did. It would be very easy to look around us all and see that we are in a precarious tipping point in our history. With all of the worries we have over the fate of this world, we have to, to some extent, set it aside and tackle today what we can. See how our care for the world around us is lacking and fix that. See how we can build up where we are tearing down. See how our relationships with the beloved pets we will bless today at our animal blessing can be extended to the creatures that surround us, sustain, and feed us. Love this created gift as God loves us. Because, my friends, no matter what we believe about God, no matter what names we call God by, no matter what our experience of God is, we know for certain that we are not the center of the universe. God is. We are just blessed enough to get to bask in God's holy and beloved glow. Let us be worthy of that glow. Let us be worthy of God, the Creator's most abundant, generous gifts. Let God today look upon us and reclaim us as good.

Amen.