

Nicene Creed and the Holy Eucharist  
4/19/2008

This evening/morning, we continue our Aprilean preaching series by addressing the Nicene Creed and the Holy Eucharist. I confess, that originally, I simply wanted to focus on the creed, but as I can be somewhat ambivalent and non-committal about the Nicene Creed, I thought I had better throw in something that I am fairly committed to and confident that I can defend. And so, I want to mostly attempt to look at why we have a creed, and what our creed offers and does not offer, with the Eucharist as a back up plan. To do so, I want to begin with some words from someone who neither confesses the Nicene Creed nor participates in the Holy Eucharist. These are words spoken by German Holocaust Survivor Elie Wiesel during an interview with NPR. He says, "I remember, May 1944: I was 15-and-a-half, and I was thrown into a haunted universe where the story of the human adventure seemed to swing irrevocably between horror and malediction. I remember, I remember because I was there with my father. I was still living with him there. We worked together. We returned to the camp together. We stayed in the same block. We slept in the same box. We shared bread and soup. Never were we so close to one another.

We talked a lot to each other, especially in the evenings, but never of death. I believed — I hoped — that I would not survive him, not even for one day. Without saying it to him, I thought I was the last of our line. With him, our past would die; with me, our future.

The moment the war ended, I believed — we all did — that anyone who survived death must bear witness. Some of us even believed that they survived in order to become witnesses... For in my tradition, as a Jew, I believe that whatever we receive we must share. When we endure an experience, the experience cannot stay with me alone. It must be opened, it must become an offering, it must be deepened and given and shared... [we must bear witness... and] What is a witness if not someone who has a tale to tell and lives only with one haunting desire: to tell it. Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future. After all, God is God because he [God] remembers."

After Jesus died, the disciples and later Paul experienced something amazing and new. They experienced God's love coming back to them in peace and not vengeance, and they felt empowered to share that message with others. They, like Elie Wiesel post-holocaust wanted to bear witness. As a result, we have their good news of God's love in the Gospels, and we have letters or epistles written to the earliest Christian communities. But by the fourth century, almost 300 years after the death of Christ, much had changed about Christianity. Jesus had not returned quickly, as they had thought. And Christianity had moved into the mainstream. The church had an organizational structure, and to many, it was considerably coopted by a new alliance with the Roman Empire. The bishops, many of whom had experienced great persecution at the hands of Roman emperors were suddenly being received and welcomed into the emperor's gilded palace. They were welcomed along with expectations that the church would help unify a crumbling empire. Suddenly, a religion that was based solely on bringing people from the margins to the center of communities, as Jesus had done with others and his own life, was no longer on the margins.

And Christianity found itself in a defining moment. There was a conference called in Nicea, at

which almost 300 bishops from as far as Spain traveled to the Bosphorous. Part of their task, for better or worse, was to define who was inside of the lines of Christianity and who was outside of Christianity. Such an endeavor could be seen both positively and negatively. Positively, the bishops sought a new Christian unity, and to do that, they needed to define what Christianity was and was NOT. But part of this effort was also fallen, because many of the bishops were dead set on a unity built on the exclusion of others, namely supposed heretics who denied the divinity of Jesus.

In the midst of this awkward ambivalence, one of the bishops, Eusebius of Caesarea, put forward the creed of his own church, and the Council adopted it. With only a few changes, and modifications from subsequent councils, this is what we know as the Nicene Creed, even today, 1700 years later. It is a Creed, a statement of belief, organized into three parts, each representing part of the trinity, and describing what we have known about those parts. It is an effort to remember and honor and define, in a way that perhaps Elie Wiesel could understand.

And so I personally share a great feeling of both awe AND bewilderment at the Nicene Creed as we use it today. I like its attempt to define and crystalize our faith. And I value a need to say what Christianity is not, i.e. there is no wrath from God or punishment. And yet, the Creed's history is also marred, and we cannot pretend that many "Christian" traditions have used its dogmatic approach to further segregate and exclude from the family of God, to do what I would call NOT Christianity.

And we cannot pretend that the Creed is complete. It talks about God, but never mentions the love of God and what that means, or what our responsibilities are in that love. And yet, I still want to use the Nicene Creed in our liturgies. I want to hear it as a testament to a faith that has lived for 1700 years. I want to remember that the people who adopted this creed stood on the shoulders of the apostles, and we stand on theirs. If we let it, it can be a beautiful witness for our search for God. In short, I believe that the Creed is like us. The creed is us. We are striving toward God, defining that relationship, often falling short, and hoping for Grace. This is why the Creed is not the climax of our liturgies. The climax of our liturgies, is the Holy Eucharist. And going from Creed to Eucharist is like moving from our own limited vision toward the perfect, forgiving love of God.

The creed, therefore, can be a great starting place for our search for faith and for God. We can see what others have offered, for better and worse. But it cannot be our end place. We must find THAT for ourselves in the context of the Eucharist, this community and our lives. And I close by sharing a creed composed in about 1960 by Christian missionaries for the Maasai, in Kenya and northern Tanzania. This Creed, like the Nicene, attempts to express the essentials of the Christian faith but this does so within the specific Maasai culture, and hopefully, it urges us to question our own creed and further develop our beliefs. This Creed reads:

We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the Bible, that he would save the

world and all nations and tribes.

We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He was buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from that grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love, and share the bread together in love, to announce the good news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen.