

Sermon: A Better Way
Text: John 14:1-14
Date: May 14, 2017
Context: WWPC
Mother's Day Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

It's not often that I get asked about the Apostle's Creed but it happened just the other day. Someone emailed me to ask if we ever use it in worship. And if not, they wondered, then why not?

It's a fair question. The short answer is that we do use it in worship. More specifically, we use that particular creed on Sundays when we celebrate the sacrament of baptism--which I'm pleased to say we'll do (pending Session approval) on Sunday, June 11th, when we'll baptized Harriet Cowell.

And we do that for a specific reason. The Apostle's Creed was among the earliest formulations of the Christian faith, and it was first said back in a time when baptism signaled that your allegiance lay with the Kingdom of God, not the Roman Empire, and when confessing that Jesus was Lord was an act of subversion, a way of saying that Caesar is not Lord.

So we use this ancient creed on baptism Sundays to remind ourselves that this is still true -- that our primary allegiance is to God and to God's realm, and to God's reign, and not to any present human empires.

But it also helps to remind us that the faith we practice is an inherited faith. It's not just our faith.

Rather, the faith we gather here to celebrate and practice every Sunday has been practiced and passed down by devout adherents over the course of 21 centuries. Our oldest creeds and prayers have value in and of themselves, but it's also true that when we affirm them and pray them, we honor the legacy of those who have gone before us, and on whose shoulders we stand.

I mention this because this is not the first time I've been asked about the Apostle's Creed, and because there is a larger story here, one that I think relates to our text for today.

Shortly after I arrived here, someone called me to say they had something they wanted to talk to me about and would it be okay if they came to see me.

Of course, I said. I'm here and would love to talk with you. Come on over.

We chatted for a bit, then he got down to business.

As the new pastor here, he wondered if I would consider re-instating the use of the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer in worship.

The question surprised me. I hadn't known that these two pillars of Reformed worship had been un-instated, as it were; that they were no longer part of the liturgical practice of this congregation.

I asked him if he knew the reasons why their use had been discontinued.

He explained that, as best he understood, the decision was driven by the belief that the majority of members here found the Apostle's Creed to be anachronistic; that its theological claims were felt to be out of date. It was also fundamentally patriarchal: *I believe in God the Father almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only son.*

This combination -- a perception of antiquated theology, on one hand, and gender-specific, patriarchal language on the other -- yielded an unhelpful result: many people either didn't say it at all, or they crossed their fingers and held them behind their back while they did say it.

The feeling was that there was not much point using an affirmation of faith in worship if people don't really believe it.

I think he was telling me this in part because he did believe it. Maybe he believed the Apostle's Creed to be literally true (heaven forbid!), or, like so many stories in the bible, maybe he believed it to be metaphorically or theologically true.

Whatever the case, it was clear that the Apostle's Creed is meaningful to him and he missed saying it in the context of worship.

Same with the Lord's Prayer, he explained. The assumption was that people just couldn't get past the part about God our Father. And so they didn't even try. They just didn't say it when it was included in the service.

I'll admit the conversation surprised me but perhaps not as much as you might imagine. Not because I myself had reached the conclusion that as a congregation we were past believing in orthodox Christianity, because I hadn't reached that conclusion then and still have not reached it today.

Indeed, I have found the range of belief here to be quite wide. We have members who stand on many different points of the theological spectrum.

Clearly as a congregation we tilt in a progressive direction--one whose members are, on the whole, more comfortable affirming more recent expressions of what our faith means, which is why we use contemporary affirmations in worship more than we use the historic creeds of the church.

But our diversity is a good and healthy thing. And because we're an inclusive congregation, we do try to honor this spectrum of belief in the liturgy we write and use.

So, if I was not entirely surprised by this conversation, it was not because I assumed the congregation was uneasy with or skeptical about traditional expressions of our faith, but because I had once raised some of these same concerns myself.

I have shared this story with a few of you before, but in seminary I once made the mistake of asking one of my professors about the pastoral dimensions of describing God as "Father."

Had I addressed this question to a professor of pastoral theology, they who would likely have given it careful consideration and things would have perhaps gone better for me.

But I did not do that. Instead I asked it of a professor of systematic theology.

"Aren't there risks involved when we use father language for God?" I asked in class one day. "Don't we risk alienating people who've been abused by their fathers? Or what if their fathers just walked out on their mothers and on them? Won't such language activate their feelings of abandonment?"

Nowadays students might ask this question in a simpler way. Shouldn't the use of "father" come with a trigger warning? Cause it very likely could activate deep trauma for people who grew up with abusive or negligent fathers.

Now, you can debate whether or not this growing concern with protecting students in the classroom is a healthy thing. At the end of the day, the world outside of the classroom is a rough and tumble place, and it's not going to make concessions for our personal sensitivities.

But when it comes to worship, and to spaces like this one -- that is, to sanctuaries, whose very purpose is to be a place of safety for all people, I think it is not only okay to ask these questions about the language we use in worship, it's important to do so.

And so I stand behind my line of inquiry to this day.

My professor, however, did not share my concerns or welcome the question. Indeed, it seemed to infuriate him.

"Father is not a name we use for God," he boomed, "it's a revelation."

"Jesus isn't giving us language to talk about God," he thundered, his growing redder by the second. "He's disclosing God's very nature."

He insisted that, as pastors and preachers, if we used this same language unapologetically to describe the ideal loving father, this marvelous truth about God could help heal the trauma inflicted on our members who grew up with less than ideal fathers, which, really, is all of us in the end.

Given that the vein in his forehead was now throbbing, the less angelic side of me was tempted to say that this truth didn't seem to have done that for him.

Privately I was also worried that while this presumably was not Jesus's intention, it was hard for people nowadays to hear this language and not think of God as an old man with a white beard sitting on a throne in the sky, like your grandfather, only bigger and older.

But the truth is my professor was right, at least to some degree. My mother was of a generation of devout church-goers who prayed to God the Father without ever worrying about whether this language limited God to a finite human construct and specific human gender.

And her faith, and the faith of thousands of devout church-goers who have prayed to this same Father God down through the years was strong and true. And many of us are here today precisely because it was strong and true, and they passed it on to us.

And yet I also know that for some of us, things aren't quite that simple.

“In my Father's house there are many dwelling places,” Jesus says toward the start of the passage I read earlier. Again, some of us hear words of consolation and hope in that language, which is why it is so often used at funerals and memorial services.

But if you are someone who grew up in a home without a father, because your father abandoned your family, maybe it's not so comforting. Maybe it's kind of scary, to believe in a God like that, because you don't know if that God is gonna stick around or if he's going to fail you in your moment of need, or if he really is a he, God is going to hurt you like all the other men in your life have hurt you.

And then for some of us, what Jesus says next is even harder to understand. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

To modern ears it sounds like Jesus is putting himself forward as the exclusive means of salvation.

Perhaps more than any other single claim in all of scripture, this idea, that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation has divided the church right down the middle.

One on side stands the wing of the church that is thrilled by this idea. On the other side, stands those who fear it makes Christianity sound parochial, and are offended by the thought that devout Jews and Muslims and Hindus are doomed to hell if they don't come around and accept Christ as their savior.

But I wonder if both sides in this debate are missing the mark here. What if there is another way to understand the idea that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

What if this claim is not about salvation in the life to come, but about a way to share in the divine life, here and now, in the hurly burly of this world.

And I want to get at this idea by sharing with you the lyrics from a song by our good friend and neighbor right here in Asheville, David Wilcox. The song is called *Show the Way*.

You say you see no hope
You say you see no reason we should dream
That the world would ever change
You say the love is foolish to believe
'Cause there will always be some crazy
With an army or a knife
To wake you from your daydream
Put the fear back in your life

Look, if someone wrote a play
To just to glorify what's stronger than hate
Would they not arrange the stage
To look as if the hero came too late?

He's almost in defeat
It's looking like the evil side will win
So on the edge of every seat
From the moment that the whole thing begins
It is love who mixed the mortar
And it's love who stacked these stones
And it's love who made the stage here
Although it looks like we're alone
In this scene, set in shadows,
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play
For in this darkness love can show the way

Now the stage is set
You can feel your own heart beating in your chest
This life's not over yet
So we get up on our feet and do our best

We play against the fear
We play against the reasons not to try
We're playing for the tears
Burning in the happy angel's eyes

For it's love who mixed the mortar
And it's love who stacked these stones
And it's love who made the stage here
Though it looks like we're alone
In this scene, set in shadows,
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play
For in this darkness love will show the way

What if that's what Jesus is getting at here? What if what's he's really say that is that if you are lost in violence, peace is the way. The peace that he embodied and taught.

If you are lost in falsehoods, truth is the way. The truth that he embodied and taught. The truth that will set you free.

If you are lost in death, life is the way. The abundant life that he came to offer, a life that can and does start right here and right now.

For in this darkness love will not only show the way, love alone is the way. The love from a God who is not just Father, but Mother, too, and then goes beyond that because the eternal and infinite God can't possibly be fully described by human constructs and gender-specific categories.

A love that has no conditions or limits. A love that loves us when we're unlovable, a love that believes in us despite the evidence, and then continues to love us until the evidence changes.

A love, finally, that also finds expression among, and is embodied by the people all around us in these pews here today, the body of Christ in the world.

Amen.