

Many Voices

I've been working hard this week, working on this sermon, practicing music for the potato-bar fundraiser this afternoon, and preparing end-of-semester projects at the seminary. I haven't been getting enough sleep, and now I'm cranky. Now a good thing about preaching is that if you're cranky, you can just let off some steam. So I want to tell you something about church that really gets on my nerves. It's just this: I don't like creeds. I don't like catechisms. It's not just that I don't agree with most of them, although I don't; it's that I don't like the whole idea of them. I'm even a bit uncomfortable with unison prayers in church, because I don't like the idea of pressuring people to say things that they aren't sure they really believe. I don't like the idea that we all have to believe exactly the same things in order to be a church together. I don't like the grasping quality of creeds, the way they try to clutch the truth in a steel trap. I do indeed have some beliefs about God, but I prefer to think of them as *conjectures*. For me, holding a conjecture about God is like holding a living bird in your hand: it's better if you *don't squeeze too hard!*

When I was a boy my family went to the Episcopal church -- in Princeton, that used to be St. Christopher's. We said the Nicene creed every Sunday. We used to say it this way:

I believe in one God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
And of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
Begotten of his Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
Very God of very God,
Begotten, not made,
Being of one substance with the Father,
By whom all things were made.

Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven,
And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary,
And was made man, ...

And it goes on from there for another minute before you get to the Amen. It's a rather beautiful thing, I think, as prayer and as poetry. But as I got a little older, as I got on towards adolescence, I began to feel that it wasn't right to say "I believe X" if, in fact, I wasn't sure about X. It wasn't right anywhere, and especially not in church, right there in front of God and everybody. So I started to skip the parts I was unsure about. At first I skipped a few words; then I realized I really needed to skip a few more; ultimately, it was something like, "I believe in one God... hmm hmm hmm ... hmm hmm hmm ... Amen."

And so I was happier when I found the UCC. The UCC cherishes the traditional creeds as testimonies of faith, as respected voices from our tradition, but we don't use a creed as a test of faith for our members, and we don't say a creed out loud together every Sunday. And I'm grateful for that, because even though I don't like creeds, I usually do like going to church.

Of course, if we all shared the same formal creed, some questions would be a lot easier to answer. Quite a few of the questions for God that we all wrote last week would be easy to answer with the Nicene Creed, or with the one of the historical catechisms of the church. For example, there were

several Christological questions: who was Jesus, and who is Jesus, and what is his relation to God? I'm going to talk about these questions today. I'm going to lift them up, maybe discern something about them, but, of course, I'm not going to answer them. And I'm not going to do any of it by myself. Since we don't have a creed that we all agree on, let's ask the Bible for help with this question. (Of course, we don't all agree on the authority of the Bible either, but bear with me!) Who is Jesus, and what is his relation to God?

The oldest writings in the New Testament are the letters of Paul, so let's start there. Paul probably wrote the first of these about twenty years after Jesus' execution -- that's still twenty years before any of our gospels were written. Now the problem with these letters of Paul is that they were written for very specific occasions. Sometimes Paul is encouraging churches he started, and sometimes he's giving them a smackdown. He had purposes for writing letters, and giving a systematic outline of his beliefs about Jesus was never one of those purposes. Still, there are quite a few hints in the letters, and we can make a good guess about how Paul would have answered our question.

Paul called Jesus *Christos*, which is Greek for *Messiah*, which is Hebrew for *anointed one*. Paul also called Jesus *Kyrios*, Lord. These are high titles in Paul's Jewish tradition -- they characterize Jesus as God's chosen leader and representative of the people of Israel. The titles were applied to various human figures in Old Testament stories, but Paul understood them in a new and more exalted way. For Paul, Jesus was not just *an* agent of God, but *the ultimate* agent of God. He was the bearer of God's presence, whose resurrection marked the beginning of the end of the age of evil on earth. And he was the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

That sounds pretty orthodox, as far as it goes, but I think that, like me, Paul would have gone "hmm hmm hmm" over some parts of the Nicene Creed. I don't think he would have accepted the assertion that Jesus is God. I don't think he understood God as a Trinity. Also, there's no sign in the letters that Paul knew any of the stories about a virgin birth. In Romans 1:3, Paul describes Jesus as "descended from David according to the flesh," and that's all he says about that.

So that's the Bible's answer, right? Well, not quite ... let's see what the gospel of Mark says about this question. That's the first of the gospels to be written, probably about forty years after Jesus' execution. It isn't easy to understand Jesus from the gospel of Mark, though, because a major theme of Mark is this: *no one understands Jesus*. The crowds don't understand him; the disciples don't understand him; nobody understands Jesus until after his death. Here's the climactic scene with the first person who understands Jesus -- it happens at the cross, and it isn't one of the disciples:

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:33-39)

In the first half of Mark, Jesus is a real winner: miracle worker, demon exorciser, authority figure, charismatic teacher, ace debater. Then, in the second half, he's a real loser: misunderstood, forsaken, persecuted, betrayed, humiliated, shamed, executed. An in both halves, in Mark's gospel, no one

understands Jesus. People who thought Jesus was just a loser are confounded by one half of his story; people who thought Jesus' life was going to be one big victory celebration are confounded by the other half. Mark's community forged a new meaning for that term *Messiah*: not just a triumphant king anointed by God, but a figure who triumphs through suffering, and leads by serving. Mark forged a new meaning for that title "Son of God," too. In the Old Testament a *benei Elohim*, a son of God, could be an angel, or a particularly just or pious man, or a king. But for Mark, Jesus is not just a son of God, but *the* Son of God, related to God in a unique way.

Like Paul, though, I think Mark's community would have gone "hmm hmm hmm" over parts of the Nicene Creed. I don't think they equated Jesus with God. Like Paul, Mark does not include anything about a virgin birth. Mark doesn't even include any post-resurrection appearances. I love the humility Mark shows by leaving so many questions unanswered. Mark's gospel ends with an empty tomb:

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:5-8)

Mark leaves us with that image, and leaves it up to us to answer the resulting flood of questions.

Let's hear from one more New Testament voice: the gospel of John. John's gospel was the last to be written, probably about sixty years after Jesus' execution. It makes very explicit but mystical statements about the relation between God and Jesus. In this gospel, Jesus is the Word of God, who was with God from the beginning, and who was God from the beginning. In John's gospel, Jesus says:

Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad." Then the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:56-58)

Notice how he applies the Old Testament language about God to himself: he is the great I AM. Elsewhere in John, he says:

If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father. (John 10:37-38)

From John's community we hear the first voices that sound like they might be moving toward an understanding of one God in three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In today's gospel reading, Jesus promises that although he, the Son, is going to the Father, God will still be with us in the form of the comforter, the advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will continue to speak to us. (The dramatic arrival of that spirit is something that we will celebrate in two more weeks, on the Sunday of Pentecost.)

So I think John's community would have been the most comfortable with the Nicene Creed; not in total agreement, perhaps, but I think they would have gone "hmm hmm hmm" in fewer places than Mark's community or Paul's. The bottom line, however, is this: the answer you get from the New Testament about who Jesus was, and is, depends on which part you read. I've talked about three different voices, but there are many more understandings of who Jesus is. Each book of the New Testament has at least one voice of its own. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament is the product of many different writers, representing the voices of many different communities. In their own time, I believe, those New Testament writers were listening for the voice of the still-speaking God, and they did their best to make their own voices harmonize with it. But, if we read them honestly, we simply cannot read them as all supporting the same modern creed or catechism. If we take them seriously, we have to let each writing speak in its own voice.

And, my friends, that's our warrant for speaking in our own diversity of voices. If we need Biblical permission for our God-given diversity, there it is: the Bible itself is a hotbed of diversity. God gave us legs, not so that we could learn to march in formation, but so that we could learn to dance -- and, sometimes, dance together. God gave us many voices, not so that we could recite creed and catechism in unison, but so that we could learn to sing -- and, sometimes, sing together.

Does that seem like too much diversity? A church with young people and old people; men and women; gay people and straight people; political liberals and political conservatives; almost-Catholics and almost-evangelicals and almost-atheists -- is that too much diversity? How can this all work? If you're in touch with your inner conservative (and I know some of us are -- Victor!) you must have asked that question, and I think it's a good question to consider. Institutions with no structure tend to dissolve, and business that diversify too much tend to vanish. What keeps a church with many voices and no official creed from turning into a shouting match?

Now that's a question I can answer. We treat one another with charity, as Jesus taught us. We take the time to listen to each other, as well as speak. And, most importantly, we take the time to listen to God. The advocate, the Holy Spirit, that Jesus promised us in John's version of the story: that Holy Spirit is still speaking. When we still all our voices, when we breathe together in silence, when we bend our thoughts toward hearing what God is saying -- in that moment, we have unity. That's God's unity within our God-given diversity.

Let us pray: Spirit of God, thank you for hearing our many voices. Now, in this time of silence, help us to hear what you are saying to each of us and to all of us. Help us to see the path you are opening, for each of us and for all of us.

(Silence)

And help us to continue hearing your voice, today and always.

Amen.

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