

Midweek Lenten Service

March 11, 2009

“To Know and Believe in God” (The Creed)

Can you believe that 92% of Americans say they “believe in God or a universal spirit.” 92%! Big deal. That doesn’t really say much. Who is this God you believe in? Allah, the false god of the Muslims? Sorry, I bear witness that there is no god called Allah, and Mohammed is his false prophet. Is this “god” you believe in some “universal spirit” or “higher power”? That won’t do you any good, either. Is it “god” as you have created him in your own image? A god who winks at sin and suits your personal opinions and is impressed by your “spirituality” and essential goodness? Sorry, Oprah, that is not the God revealed in Holy Scripture.

Just the fact that you believe that one true God exists, that by itself will do you no good. On that point, you are no better than the demons. St. James says as much: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!” You see, the devil and all the demons know who God is. They even know who Jesus is, “the Holy One of God.” They believe that God exists. But that is not the same as knowing and believing in God in the way that we have just confessed in the Creed.

“I believe in God.” That’s what we all have just said. But what does it mean to “believe” in him? Let’s do a little “pew” survey of our own: That long piece of wood there--and there are a bunch of them in this room--do you believe that that right there is a church pew? Do you believe that a church pew exists in that space? Yes? Well, that is not belief or faith in the biblical sense. If you truly believe in that pew, then what will you do? You will sit in it! You will entrust your life to it and place yourself in it, trusting that it will hold you and support you. That is more like the idea of “I believe” as we say it in the Creed. Not just that God exists, but that you are trusting in him for your life and salvation.

To believe that one God exists does not yet tell you who this God is or how he is disposed toward you or how you are put right with him. Luther explains it like this in the Large Catechism: “Even if all people outside Christianity--whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites--believe in and worship only one true God, they still do not know what His mind toward them is and cannot expect any love or blessing from Him. Therefore, they abide in eternal wrath and damnation. For they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, are not illumined and favored by any gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

In the Creed, therefore, we are saying much more than just “there is a God who exists.” We are saying that this God has revealed himself to us, so that we know him and believe in him, that is, trust in him. That we do know what his mind toward us is and that we can

expect love and blessing from him. That is Christian faith, and it is created and nurtured by the revealed Gospel.

To begin with, we are saying that God is our kind and loving heavenly Father, who created us and provides for us and preserves and protects us. Now how would we know this, except that God has revealed himself to us as such in the Gospel? Otherwise, we might think that God is kind and loving toward us--if our crops are good, our health is good, and everything is sunshine and roses. And we might think that God is treating us well because of how good we are.

But what about those times when our finances go south or the doctor's diagnosis is grim and the sunshine and roses have turned to gray clouds and dandelions? What about then? Well, then we might think that we have to try harder to get back into God-or-the-gods' good favor. We might offer up sacrifices to the gods or really work on our behavior. But we would always be looking over our shoulder, and we could never be certain that we had done enough to please God and be right with him. And death would always be lurking out there as the Great Unknown.

This is where Jesus comes in. It is only through Jesus that we know a gracious God under all circumstances. Christ, the Son of God, came from the Father's side to reveal God to us, to reveal the Father's kind and loving heart toward us. This is what Jesus taught his disciples: "Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all."

Jesus taught the love of the Father, and he put it into action--above all, by going to the cross for us. This is how we can be sure, in all circumstances, that we have a God who loves us: by looking to the cross of Christ. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" In other words, if God has shown us the greatest love of all by sending his Son to go to the cross for our justification and eternal salvation, then we can be absolutely certain that God loves us in any and every circumstance, even when things aren't going so well. God's love is sure. Look to the cross. See there the Father's heart of love for you.

For this is what God has done for you in Christ: He has saved you for eternal life. Remember those Ten Commandments we talked about last week? They cannot save you. You cannot earn your way to heaven by how good you are. You do not keep those commandments of love for God and love for your neighbor. The Commandments show you that you a sinner. Nor can you make it into heaven by how soft God is. No, judging simply according to his Law, God's punishment for sin is death. There's no getting around that; there's no sweeping it under the rug.

But again, this is where Jesus comes in. He comes in like a Lamb, like the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world--who takes away your sin by carrying it for you to the cross. There he dies as your perfect substitute, taking the judgment and the death you have earned. Christ alone sets us free from the eternal death that would be our lot otherwise. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

So we know the love of the Father only through the Son. This is why Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me." And this is why the Apostle John writes, "No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. . . .Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."

Alright, so we know and believe in a loving heavenly Father only through his Son, Jesus Christ. But now, how do we know Christ? Now we move from the Second Article of the Creed to the Third Article and the work of the Holy Spirit. Notice how Luther begins his Explanation of the Third Article: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him." Think of what you're saying there! "I believe . . . that I cannot believe!" Yes, you would know nothing of Christ except that the Holy Ghost has preached him to you. And with that preaching, the Spirit has created saving faith in your heart. It is all by grace, a gift: both Christ dying for you and the Spirit giving you the faith to believe in him. All of it, the whole ball of wax, a gift.

The Holy Spirit delivers Christ to you, brings Christ to you, along with all of Christ's blood-bought benefits of forgiveness, life, and salvation. What Jesus won for you on the cross the Spirit delivers to your doorstep, right to your address, with your name written on it.

How does the Spirit do this? Through means. Through the means of grace, the Gospel, in Word and Sacrament. In other words, through the ministry of the Church. This is why you need constantly to be in the Word, living from your Baptism, fed with the Sacrament-- constantly being strengthened by the Gospel, so that your faith will remain strong to the end.

And so now we come full circle. We know a kind and loving heavenly Father, who cares for us even when it looks like he doesn't--we know the Father only through his Son, Jesus Christ, whose cross displays the deepest divine love. And we know Christ only by the Holy Spirit bringing us to faith in him through the Gospel. Luther sums it up like this, again from the Large Catechism: "God has given to us His Son and the Holy Spirit, who brings us to Himself. For we could never grasp the knowledge of the Father's grace and favor except through the Lord Christ. Jesus is a mirror of the fatherly heart, outside of whom we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But we couldn't know anything about Christ either, unless it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit."

To know and believe in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Not a vicious circle-
-by no means! But rather an unending, eternal circle of love and grace! In the Gospel, we
come to know this God, this Holy Trinity, as he reveals himself to us. In the Creed, we
gladly confess this faith for all the world to hear. Amen.