

Week 6 – Baptismal Covenant 2

This week, our goal is to dive into the Apostles' Creed and to try and get students to think their way into it, to think about what we claim to believe, and to get them to ask questions that they may have about it.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit into this room that we might grow to understand how our life together binds us with your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and that same Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Texts for Discussion

- Baptismal Covenant (BCP 304-305)

Primary Take Aways

- When we say the creed, we affirm our faith in one God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- The creed helps us figure out how to talk about that most complicated of topics

Important Links to Previous Weeks (“Where We Are”)

- Remind students where we are in the liturgy (in the Word of God section of the Eucharist, before The Holy Communion, where the confession and the peace are)
- Remind students how Jesus' baptism in water links us back to creation, where the Spirit went out from God and hovered over the waters
- Remind students of our discussion last week: the oneness of God, the way Jesus' actions and his resurrection caused an issue about how to continue to affirm God is one while saying that Jesus is somehow on the “creator” side and not the “creature side” of things, and how the Holy Spirit brings us into that relationship between Jesus and the Father

Important Background

- See Important Background information from last week.
- In many churches, when we say the creed, the whole congregation, including the priest and the choir, turn to face east (or to the altar). In doing so, it links us to our baptisms.

Structure

In this lesson, our goal is to spend time reading through the creed as a group. It highlights in some ways the “non-negotiables” of our faith, so we want to give an opportunity to let students think about things.

First, before we open the Prayer Book, we can break into groups. Last week, we started with a question about what students believed about God. This week, we want to remind them of that question, of their answers, but we want to reframe it. We want each group to have to take a minute and think about the following scenario:

Discussion question:

- Your group is on a desert island and you have no prayer books or Bibles anymore. You decide in your infinite wisdom to set up a church. Decide what stories and what beliefs – that you can remember! – are important and jot them down.

The reason for this exercise is to see what they think. (Also, to see how much they've been paying attention!) But mainly it is to open our discussion, to see where they think the important material is.

Write up their answers on the whiteboard, and then turn to the BCP.

First question: get a volunteer to read the question and the answer.

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think we refer to the first person of the Trinity as “father”?
- What is the significance of emphasizing that God is the creator of heaven and earth?

The problem of the fatherhood of God is relatively recent. Not necessarily because of the language post-feminism but because of the way the language became imbued with notions of gender over the course of the centuries after its development. Feminism brought these overtones to light. In the earliest development of the language, God as “Father,” was most certainly not associated with thinking of God as “male.” The emphasis was on relationship, familial relationship. And there is an argument to be made that the notion of a “father” bearing children problematizes the relationship in a helpful way, a way that the notion of a “mother” would not do: a father does not literally birth a child, while a mother does. Calling God “father,” then, would emphasize that radical disjunction between us as “created” and God as “uncreated.” In other words, God creates us from something other than himself. So we are always speaking metaphorically when we talk of God as “father,” which means at times we are more than able to refer to God as “mother.”

So why keep the language at all? There is a simple reason: when Jesus teaches us to pray, he says, “Our Father.” Jesus is inviting us into his relationship with God. (That’s what happens in baptism, when we’re baptized into Christ and raised to new life in the Spirit, just as Jesus was. We – God’s creation – are brought into the eternal relationship between Father and Son and Holy Spirit.)

“Creator of heaven and earth” links us back to creation, back to Genesis, and emphasizes that the God we’re talking about is the God of the Pentateuch, the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and Ruth.

Second question: Get a volunteer to read it and the response.

Discussion questions:

- What do we mean by “Lord”?
- What do we notice about the way it tells us about Jesus’ life?

In the same way that “Father” is not to be read through the lens of gender and human fathers, “Lord” here should be read as resisting the normal definitions. First it links us back to the word used to translate the unspeakable holy name in the Old Testament: Lord God. Jesus is being tied directly back to that word. In addition, the whole narrative of Jesus’ life and of God’s relationship with Israel resists seeing God and his Son as lords from a human perspective. When we think of lords and kings – think the Dark Lord Voldemort! – we think of unbridled power and something approximating a dictator. But the kind of God we’re talking about is one who refuses to assert his power but instead is willing to die rather than do so. We can still talk of power, but it’s power *for the sake* of his creation, rather than selfish greedy authoritarianism.

In the creator/created divide, the creed puts Jesus firmly on the side of God, the uncreated, the creator, first before moving to Jesus’ life with us. Notice how the phrases bypass his ministry. Theologians throughout history have read “He suffered” as alluding to his earthly ministry. But it is interesting to see that, for the earliest Christians, what seems to have been of utmost importance was his Incarnation and death, his descent to the dead, and his resurrection and ascension. And this is still built into our calendar. In ordinary time we focus on the life and ministry of Jesus. The times that require special preparation (Christmas and Easter) emphasize just these parts of Jesus’ earthly life.

Third question: Get a volunteer to read it and the response.

Discussion questions:

- Notice anything different about how the creed talks about the Holy Spirit?
- What does affirming the five statements about the Holy Spirit tell us about our relationship with the God we profess to believe in?

The Holy Spirit’s relationship to God the Father at this point in history wasn’t as well thought out as it would be over the next 300 or so years. But notice how we’re following the church calendar here: ascension and then Pentecost. And Pentecost is often seen as the birthday of the church. At Pentecost, the early church had to start talking about God as though there were three persons to talk about within the one God of Israel. But the real way we see the Spirit is through the church, where we have communion (a communion stretching backwards and

forwards through time and space), where we know we have the forgiveness of sins (through baptism), and where we know that there will be the resurrection of the body to eternal life.

So, we cannot forget we are dealing with the one God, and the early church had to figure out ways to talk about what we see in our picture at Jesus' baptism, in our picture of God at the beginning of creation. They settled on talking about Jesus, the man Jesus, son of Mary, who referred to himself as "Son" and to the God of Israel as "Father," and who promised to send his Spirit to guide the communion of his disciples into all truth. And so we need to tease these persons apart while always remembering that we're talking about the one God, the Father, creator of heaven and earth, who created all things through his Son, and who breathed life into them through his Spirit. The church has been invited by Jesus through the Spirit into the very life of the one God.

Closing Prayer

Today's prayer can be the collect for Trinity Sunday (BCP #228).

The Lord bless us and keep us; the Lord make his face to shine upon us and be gracious unto us; the Lord lift up his countenance upon us and give us peace.

Cheat Sheet

10 minutes: Welcome, Prayer, Candle Lighting, Where we are

Heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit into this room that we might grow to understand how our life together binds us with your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and that same Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Where we are in BCP: in Word of God before Holy Communion, where confession and peace occur. Baptism itself: links us to Jesus' baptism and to creation.

Discussion question:

- Your group is on a desert island and you have no prayer books or Bibles anymore. You decide in your infinite wisdom to set up a church. Decide what stories and what beliefs – that you can remember! – are important and jot them down.

10 minutes: First Question

Main point: When we say God is our “father,” we mean he has a similar relationship with us that he had with Jesus because Jesus invites us into it.

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think we refer to the first person of the Trinity as “father”?
- What is the significance of emphasizing that God is the creator of heaven and earth?

20 minutes: Second Question

Main point: The creed follows the church calendar, emphasizing the great feasts: Christmas and Easter, Incarnation and Crucifixion/Resurrection.

Discussion question:

- What do we mean by “Lord”?
- What do we notice about the way it tells us about Jesus' life?

10 minutes: Third Question

Main point: When we talk about the Spirit of God, we must talk about the church because the church has been invited by Jesus through the Spirit into the very life of the one God.

Discussion questions:

- Notice anything different about how the creed talks about the Spirit?
- What does affirming the five statements about the Holy Spirit tell us about our relationship with the God we profess to believe in?

10 minutes: Closing Prayer

The Collect for Trinity Sunday (BCP #228).

The Lord bless us and keep us; the Lord make his face to shine upon us and be gracious unto us; the Lord lift up his countenance upon us and give us peace.