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Jesus Christ His Only Son, Our Lord
“Second in a Series on the Apostles’ Creed”
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

I was working in one of my branch offices the other day and one of those gentle songs from the early Sixties came over the sound system. It begins, “The more I see you, the more I want you ...” It’s a love song, of course, and it’s been recorded several times since 1962, but as I listened to the words I was reminded how so many love songs could just as easily point beyond the girl or the guy they were written for, all the way to the source of love itself. They could point all the way to Jesus.

Now there’s a clunky, prosaic way to draw analogies between loving God and loving another person, but I think falling in love is so powerful, and songs about love are so moving, because they reflect the deepest impulse behind creation itself. God may be a mathematician, as some scientists say when they marvel at how much of the world can be described by equations. But God is also a poet and a lover, and the fact that people are forever falling in love and writing about it is a clue to the deep poetry and love in the heart of our Creator.

The second article of the Apostles’ Creed is about Jesus, and it says a number of things about him, but Jesus is first and foremost all about love. A beautiful ancient hymn begins, “Of the Father’s love begotten, ’ere the worlds began to be.” The Bible tells us that God is love, and the first thing love does is look around for someone to share it. The love in us sets out in search of friends and companions who are

somewhere out there, waiting to be found, but when God wants people to love, God has to create them. And God lets human beings in on the joy of creation too, when women and men have children of their own, helping God make even more people to love.

We can say all sorts of things about the people we love. We can describe them and tell stories about the things they've done. But none of our descriptions are anything like our relationships with the people themselves. That's how it is with Jesus too. We're so used to saying things about Jesus that we're tempted to forget the main thing, which is to grow in relationship with him, and love him, and enjoy his marvelous friendship.

The creed says Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary," and some people stop right there. Really? they say. Born of a virgin? We all know that's not the way things work. How are we supposed to believe anything else about Jesus when the first thing the creed tells us contradicts the facts of life?

Actually, that's not the first thing the creed says about Jesus. The first thing is that he is the only Son of God, and that makes all the difference. Of course there's a sense in which all of us who love God are sons and daughters of God, but the creed means something different here. It reminds us that Jesus is not just another human being who happens to be exceptionally good, a hero we should all try to emulate. No, this Jesus shares the very essence of God in a way that no one else does. He is the Word of God made flesh, the Logos, the logic of the mind of God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

So when the creed, echoing Matthew's gospel, says

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that Jesus was conceived in an extraordinary way, maybe that's not so surprising after all. If you believe Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God, eternal with the Father, then you might expect the way he came into this world to be rather unique as well.

It's a perennial temptation for people to boil the greatest claims of religion down to clichés and commonplaces—probably because they're so much easier to manage. Lots of people want to reduce Christ to just another philosopher and all of Christianity to an elaborate way of saying, “Be nice to those you care about, do your reasonable best, and God will be satisfied and let you into heaven when you die.”

But that's not what the gospel says. The Bible says that the Maker of heaven and earth came to us in Jesus Christ to seek and save the lost. It says we all sin and fall short of the glory of God, but while we were still sinners Christ died for us, and rose again to reconcile us to God and to show us the depth and breadth of God's own love. Jesus is, as the Nicene Creed says, “Light from Light, true God from true God.”

And yet he is fully human too. Jesus really is like us. The creed says he “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried,” which is to say that Jesus was a real historical person. He experienced the whole range of things that we experience. He knew hunger and thirst, and the satisfaction of food and drink. He knew the joy of companionship and the heartbreak of betrayal. He felt temptation and pain and suffering, all the way to death.

The chief complaint against God in this world is the reality of suffering. If God is good, people ask, why is there

so much suffering? That's a big question. We've talked about it before and we'll come back to it again. But for the moment, the point of the creed is that God is no stranger to suffering, because God in Christ has suffered too. That's why Christians have always read that description of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah as a prophecy of Christ: "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and familiar with pain." Not only has God in Christ known suffering, but his suffering was for us:

He was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

Some people read those words as an occasion for feeling guilty, but the Christian message is exactly the opposite. Objectively speaking, we *are* guilty, since we constantly fail to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. But Jesus takes the sins of the world upon himself, to forgive and redeem and make us new. So the gospel is good news after all, but we only see how good it is when we recognize and confess how bad things might have been. We might have been left alone in the mess we've made, and God could have condemned and rejected us all. But, as John's gospel says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

I've been reading Pope Francis's book called *The Joy of the Gospel*. It really is quite good, as meaningful for Protestants as for Roman Catholics—and by the way, we'll be coming to that line in the creed about "the holy catholic church" in a few more weeks. Francis's opening words are "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who

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encounter Jesus,” and he goes on to say, “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.”

The Pope knows how easily religion can devolve into nothing more than doctrines and routines and rituals, important as those might be, but he reminds us that the fundamental point of Christianity is to have a personal relationship with God in Christ—a relationship that, the more it grows and deepens, the more it shapes and satisfies all of life.

There’s a line in the Apostles’ Creed that says Jesus descended into hell. People have debated how literally to interpret that, but at a minimum it means there is no place Christ will not go in order to seek and save the lost. Anyone in any time or place who wants to be freed from the shackles of sin, from our self-centered alienation and estrangement from God, can receive the grace of God and be set free. We don’t need to wonder where hell is, in any geographical sense, because hell is always located in somebody’s soul, and the creed assures us that no soul is beyond the redeeming reach of the love of Christ.

None of this would count for much if, when Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, that was the end of his story. If death was the last word in the biography of Jesus, we’d be no better off than we’ve been all along with philosophers and poets whose lofty words go silent in the grave. But death is not the last word. On the other side of Good Friday there is Easter, which is why, in retrospect, that Friday came to be called “Good.” So the creed says, “the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

We still say “sitteth,” by the way, and tell of the Holy Ghost rather than the Holy Spirit, because that’s the traditional language many of us learned when we were young, and there’s something comforting about the tradition, though of course the meaning won’t change when people update the language. The archaic words incidentally remind us that the basic truth of the gospel never changes, and the image of sitting at God’s right hand remains as metaphorical today as when Jesus first tried to tell his followers something of what the kingdom of heaven is like.

The vision of Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father is to say that the Father and the Son are of the same essence. What’s true of God is true of Christ. So God is our Creator and the world is created through Christ, the Word of God. God is our Redeemer, and the world is redeemed through Christ our Savior. God is the one who will judge us, and the creed says of Christ, “from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”

“Quick” is another archaic word we keep for tradition’s sake. It simply means those who are alive, as people used to talk about the “quickenings” when an unborn child begins to move in its mother’s womb. So the creed means that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead.

An article of faith is that Christ will come again to judge the world and bring about a new heaven and a new earth. There’s another great debate, going all the way back to biblical times, over how literally to understand this as well. A whole gaggle of preachers presume to tell us what exactly to look for and insist that whatever it is, it’s coming very soon. You can sell lots of books and gather a large following with that message because, in a world that loves drama, the end of the world is the biggest drama of all.

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Many of us believers are skeptical, not that Christ will come again, but that any of these preachers really know what they claim to know. People have been predicting the end of the world for centuries, and contrary to all the “End Times” clamoring, there’s an important sense in which it really doesn’t matter when Christ comes again. The truth is, whether each of us goes to Christ at the end of our lives or Christ comes to everyone at once—either way, we need to be ready to meet Jesus soon enough. Being ready means loving and serving him as our Savior and Lord, and living the way God wants us to live.

In the meantime, we need to remember that the One who comes to judge the quick and the dead is not an impartial judge. In an ordinary trial, you want the judge to be impartial, to favor neither the prosecution nor the defense. But when Jesus comes to judge, it’s a different story altogether. The judge in this case is entirely partial. He comes down squarely on the side of the defense. In fact, Jesus *is* the defense. That’s why Paul asks, “Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us. Who then will separate us from the love of Christ?”

It’s a rhetorical question, of course. The trial is stacked in our favor. The judge wants us to win. All we have to do is accept his offer to make us a new creation. So Paul goes on to answer his own question:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so, the more we see Jesus, the more we want him, and the stronger our relationship with him becomes.



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