

The Rev. Andria Skornik
July 11, 2021
Sermon on Mark 6:14-29

When I first came to the Episcopal Church one of the things I noticed was that every week we said a creed. Often it was the Nicene Creed. But sometimes it was the one in the New Zealand Prayer Book or the Affirmation of Faith from Godly Play. And it didn't take long to find out that some people had a hard time with the Nicene Creed.

It's not surprising. This was a church that people were drawn to because it was okay to doubt, or to not be sure of one's belief, or for people not to believe the same things. So when it came to the Nicene Creed, a part of the liturgy heavy in theological doctrine and belief statements, it makes sense that some wondered if they should say these words if they didn't personally believe them.

I had the same question. I found myself resonating with the man in Mark who came to Jesus with the paradoxical confession, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief." But the way it was explained to me by my priest at the time, was that it wasn't really about me or what I believed. The Nicene Creed isn't a statement of personal faith. When we say the Nicene Creed, we say WE believe.

To say we believe takes it out of the realm of our ability, thoughts and feelings. As Jaroslav Pelikan, a former historian of creeds at Yale, said in an "On Being" interview,

My faith life, like that of everyone else, fluctuates. There are ups and downs and hot spots and cold spots and boredom and ennui and all the rest can be there. And so I'm not asked on a Sunday morning, 'As of 9:20, what do you believe?' And then you sit down with a three-by-five index card saying, 'Now let's see. What do I believe today?' No, that's not what they're asking me. They're asking me, 'Are you a member of a community which now, for a millennium and a half, has said, we believe in one God?'

In this way, saying "we believe" makes it about more than us personally, or even us as a specific church community. Rather we're saying here, these are things that our mothers, fathers, parents of the faith have believed. What they passed on to us. It's not perfect. But it was their best attempt at giving definition to who they understood their God to be. A Trinity. A relationship. Three inter-relating being in one.

Now that's not to say that it's without limitations. As Richard Rohr points out, in the Nicene Creed, there is a single punctuation mark that separates the phrase that Jesus was "born of the virgin Mary" and "suffered under Pontius Pilate." In doing so, it misses so much about what was important in between Jesus' birth and his death. The creed also doesn't talk about love, service or

forgiveness. And calling God “Almighty” only, speaks to God’s power but not God’s suffering or vulnerability; all key things about who we are and why we gather.

Yet, I still see the value of what happens when we come together week after a week to say, “We Believe.” It is a way of affirming that we are part of something bigger. In a culture where we express our identity mostly in terms of “I” and “me,” there is power in affirming and understanding ourselves as a “we.” And when we do that, it’s no longer just about what we have to offer on our own, but the way we are supported in community, and what happens when our faith is brought together. As someone from this parish put it so well, “When I say the Nicene Creed, I may not have all the faith I need to say everything. But someone does. On those days I rely on other people’s faith to carry me.”

In the book of Acts it says the believers brought what they had in common and no one was in need. I’ve always thought about that in terms of tangible things. The way we bring our resources together. And I have been awestruck by the way people in this community have brought their resources together so that no one was without during Covid. But how about seeing it beyond that? Sometimes what we have to give might be the strength we have; the grace we have; the peace we have. It is whatever thing we have that someone else might need or what someone has for us. We are not left to do it all on our own. We have been brought together for this very reason.

On any given day I might not have what I need to get through, but someone does. And on any given day I have something that someone requires. Our wholeness comes from what we have when we say “we.”

And that is what I see in this morning’s gospel. To be sure, it’s a divergence from what we usually get, which is some sort of teaching or parable that challenges or encourages us in some way. But this is a story about something bad that happened. And this particular passage doesn’t finish with redemption.

What I notice, though, and what hits me every time at the end is how the disciples come for the body of their beloved friend and teacher. To do the rituals. To say goodbye. To help John transition to the other side. What is so painfully true about this story is that faith, living a good life as John did, doesn’t shield us from the things that can happen in this life. But even in the midst of it, the community is there. It comes around the grieving, the suffering, the martyr. Where in other places loss and grief pushes people out, here the community pulls in. And THAT is the presence of God.

We might look at this story and say where is God in all this ugliness? But God is incarnate in the disciples. In the same way, We might not always see or feel God or even have faith to believe.

But we see God in the faces that smile with us as we share the peace. We hear God in the voices that are joined with ours on Sunday morning. We are surrounded by God in the funerals, baptisms and weddings as we come around each other or where others come around us. In many of these liturgies we expressly say we are there for you. "We will" we respond. We will be there to support each other in whatever comes up. That is the presence of Christ.

This morning, where do you need someone to come around you? What do you need that someone else has to give? What is in you that someone else is needing this very moment?

May we experience the grace of God in who we are together.

Amen.