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National Presbyterian Church

Apostles' Creed: Clearing Your Conscience

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"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord, who suffered was crucified, dead and buried, descended into hell"

Over the winter we're looking together at one of the most important and ancient summaries of the Christian faith – *The Apostles' Creed*.

Over the past three weeks, in particular, we've focused on five statements in the Creed, each of which speak about Jesus' suffering and death: the stunning and shocking affirmation that, though Jesus was (and is) God's only Son, God among us in flesh and blood, fully human, fully divine – nevertheless he chose not to escape the human lot or experience at its worst, when he became one of us, but chose instead to share it by suffering and dying. He permitted other people to exercise power over him. So that, as the Creed says:

1. He suffered under Pontius Pilate; 2 He was crucified; 3. He was dead; 4. He was buried; and 5. He descended into hell

And all of this begs the question WHY? Why such a terrible outcome or experience for God when God enters his own world, his own creation?

To which the answer we've looked at is this: that he did it to show us both who He (God) is, and to show us who we are. And, more than that, He did it to heal and mend the broken relationship between us and God that we have caused – a relationship that you and I have broken repeatedly, sometimes by actively rebelling against God, choosing our way over God's way; but more often than not, breaking the relationship by Simply ignoring God – treating God as if he were of little or no account to us.

Either way our actions are destructive, and, what I said last week was this, that such sin against our maker is worthy of God's justice, of God's judicial sentence – which is "death." Think of it this way: God is "Life"; and if we turn our backs on God, we are walking away from "life," into the path of "death"; and this choice becomes God's judicial sentence.

But it's not so simple as that, because there's a conflict in the heart of God, because God is not only a judge, but also a lover, who adores us and holds us in such high esteem (He made us in his image), that he does not want us to suffer the punishment we deserve! And so he does the unthinkable:

He decides to bear his own justice himself: to suffer the death that WE deserve, both physical and spiritual; to descend, as it were, to hell – so we don't have to.

Which is really the same kind of story that Charles Dickens writes about in his Tale of Two Cities.

It's a story set in the late 1700's in the two cities of London and Paris, where (late in the story) a man called Charles Darnay is in a French prison and is about to

die – death by guillotine. And then, out of the blue, a man called Sydney Carton, shows up!

It's a remarkable event, made all the more remarkable by the fact that Carton is the very man who has lost out to Darnay in love for Darnay's wife, Lucie.

With Darnay's death, with Darnay dead and gone, Carton could have stepped back into the picture to win back Lucie's love. It looked as if Darnay's death was to Carton's advantage. But this is not how he thinks. Instead he does the unthinkable: he walks into death itself for Darnay, his opponent in love.

Carton manages to get into France (who would want to do that? France is in turmoil, filled with danger!), and into Darnay's prison (and who would do that?). He manages to have Darnay drugged, and because they look alike -- to change places with him.

And so, when it comes time for death (for Darnay's judgment and condemnation) it's Sydney Carton who faces death by guillotine instead of Charles Darnay; Carton takes Darnay's place, the innocent for the guilty, dying at the very time that the man condemned to die is whisked away to freedom and life

And that's where the book ends. Though it begs the question: What does Darnay do next? – Knowing that he is alive only because someone else died for him? How should he respond? How ought he to respond?

And the same question pertains to us too! How should we live? How should we direct and shape the course of our lives when we know that we are alive only because someone else actually died in our place – died so we could live?

Good question for Darnay! And good question for us too as Christians! What do we do now? Now that we know that Jesus has carried our sentence of death in his body on the cross so that we can be reconciled to God, and find life with God forever?

To which the Bible gives a number of answers, three of which derive from our text today in Hebrews 10.

1. A New Covenant Commitment: Return the favor!

If God gives his life to you, then the only appropriate response is surely – to give our life back to God! You make a covenant with God, a contract with God, a commitment to God -- in which you acknowledge deliberately that your life is no longer yours, but his!

In some ways it's simple – like a business transaction.

Our passage describes the death of Jesus in terms of covenant or “contract” making. On the cross, God makes a very public promise or covenant, sealed in the blood of Christ, to forgive us our sins, and to help us to obey him. So in Hebrews 10: 16-17 God says:

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days (after the death and resurrection of Christ), says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,” and I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.

It's as if we're in the office with God and the covenant or contract is on the table and the deal needs to be consummated, and now the ball is in our court to respond, deliberately, publicly, to

make a covenant commitment to God in return. To say: If this is what you've done for me, then this is what I'll do for you: *I'll give my life to you, to direct as you will* – which is what it means to call Jesus “Lord”!

When we join the church, we affirm that Jesus is both *our Savior* and *our Lord*.

- A “**Savior**” is someone who helps us when we cannot help ourselves; when we're in deep trouble and there's no escape. A “Savior” is not merely a helper, or an assistant, or a crutch: Sidney Carton was a savior – Darnay would have died without him! And Jesus is a Savior – without him we'd die too!
- **But a Lord is different.** It's about what we do next. It's about giving allegiance and authority and ownership to someone else: the Lord is the person to whom you say, “You have the right to call the shots in my life.”

So Paul writes to the Galatians (Gal. 6:14 and 2:19-20)

*May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.
I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live,
but Christ who lives in me.*

And to the Corinthians: (1 Cor. 6: 19-20)

*Do you not know that You are not your own;
BUT you were bought at a price. (by the death of Jesus)
Therefore glorify God with your body. – By all that you do*

So we have to ask ourselves:

Have we ever signed on the dotted line with Jesus in this way? Made a covenant with him not a bargain:

NOT “*if you do this, I'll do that*”

BUT “*since you have already done this for me (in the past), I can do nothing other than – trust my life into your hands, and give you the authority to direct my paths.*”

So, in response to the death of Christ for us, in the first place, we need to make a definite, public contract or covenant with God. And once we have done that, in the second place – we need to allow the message of the cross to enter and change and clear our consciences – and to give us a ‘godly confidence’

2. Godly Confidence

Let me read from Hebrews 10, again, vv19-23

¹⁹*Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, 20by the new and living way that Jesus opened for us through his flesh,
²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith,
with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience
and our bodies washed with pure water.
²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
for he who has promised is faithful*

Conscience is a tricky thing. It's never a guide to right and wrong by itself alone, because it can be molded and shaped and suppressed in all kinds of ways.

For example, a cannibal from a long line of cannibals may have no conscience at all about eating human flesh it's never bothered anyone he knows, and it doesn't bother him! So, in the same way, some people aren't bothered by the things that ought to bother them! Some need to reactivate their consciences and become truly bothered – or even outraged by their own behavior – or the behavior of others in all kinds of ways that they're presently blind to.

And then, for others, the problem is not too little conscience, but too much! For some people, conscience is constantly at work, destroying all confidence. Psychologist, Susan Whitbourne, provides a really helpful list of different types of guilt that can rattle our consciences, whether they ought to be rattled or not (see <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201208/the-definitive-guide-guilt>).

Guilt #1: Guilt for something you did that was actually wrong.

For example, when you cause harm to others, including physical or psychological pain. OR guilt because you violate your own ethical or moral code, by cheating, or lying or stealing; -- or doing something you swore you would never do again (such as smoking, drinking, or overeating).

Guilt #2: Guilt for something you didn't do, but want to do that violates your own standards – and you feel guilty!

Guilt #3: Guilt for something you think you did.

This is where it gets complex! Much of the unhappiness we experience is due to our own irrational thoughts about situations. If you think you did something wrong, you can experience almost as much guilt as if you actually committed the act, or even more.

Guilt #4: Guilt that you didn't do enough to help someone.

Perhaps you have a friend who is very ill or who is caring for an ill relative. You've given hours of your free time to help that person, but now you have other obligations that you absolutely must fulfill, and you feel guilty

Guilt Cause #5: Survivor Guilt. Guilt that you're doing better than someone else.

Survivor guilt occurs when people lose families, friends, or neighbors in combat or other disasters, but they themselves remain untouched or, at least, alive. On a different (and more subtle) level, survivor guilt also characterizes those who make a better life for themselves than their family or friends.

There are times, of course when these kinds of guilt can become obsessive and compulsive – and if that's happening (and here I'm being very serious!), then it may well be time to go see a doctor (just as you would with any other aches and pain) – there's remarkable medication out there that can help us.

But just as much, if not more, for those of us who believe that Christ died for our sins, the first step is to take the time; to make the time, to allow the message of the cross to sink in. The message that we are not perfect now, we never have been, and this side of heaven we will never be perfect. AND YET DESPITE OUR IMPERFECTIONS, real or imaginary, intended or unintended, past, present or future, CHRIST ADORES US and DIED FOR US. And our

response needs to be to name and gather all that guilt into our prayers and hand it over to Jesus, and then to listen for his voice who says to us from the cross:

Here! Give that stuff to me. All of it. NOW! And let me carry it for you; let me dispose of it for you. And let me give you back the confidence I want you to have as a member of my kingdom and family, as my child my brother, my sister!

Listen to Hebrews 10:20-23 again:

Since we have **confidence** to enter the sanctuary (the very presence of God) by the blood of Jesus, and since we have a great priest over the house of God (Jesus, praying for us in heaven, saying give me your guilt and burdens), let us approach with a true heart **in full assurance of faith**, with our hearts sprinkled **clean from an evil conscience** and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope **without wavering**, for he who has promised is faithful

SO, if Jesus dies on the cross for us

First, we have to respond with a covenant commitment

Second, we have to respond by letting go of, and handing over our guilt

And, third, if we believe that Jesus dies on the cross for us, we have to live out our faith, growing together in community with others

3. Growing in Community.

SO, once again from Hebrews 10

¹⁹ since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,
²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God

- Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,
- Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,
- but encouraging one another,
- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

About ten years ago, I was involved in a group that helped women – mainly mothers – in the local county detention center receive treatment for their drug addictions. The problem was this – that despite all the resolve in the world to get off drugs once they were released from jail, and to stick with a 3-6 month rehab program, they’d find themselves back in the same environment, in the same old community, with others who had no intention of getting off drugs,

And because of the influence of the old community, many would drop out of the rehab program and be back on drugs within a few months.

And the cycle of arrest and detention would continue. And this was not only a tragedy for their lives, but a tragedy for their children, and a huge expense in social services for the community.

So what members of about 20 churches decided to do was to ask the city government to re-allocate funds, to shift them away from “post detention center” social services, and create an “in-jail” rehab program that had to be completed before release. Studies showed that any city government that did this, that gathered groups of people in need into communities of growth and commitment in which they would stay the course – there

would be a 4 to 1 dollar return on their investment, and a priceless return for families healed from that day on. And when almost a thousand of us gathered from across the city in a local church to speak to the city and county officials (about 50% of us black and 50% of us white), the city government heard us and took action!

When you have an idea in your head – a resolve in your head that is not shared by those around about you the possibility of that idea being fruitful is very small: most of us will too easily cave-in to the majority. But when we gather with others – with a common purpose and a common faith – then the possibility of change and growth erupts.

Our society and community around us as a whole used to share the belief that at that heart of all of history stands the life and death of Jesus Christ. But so much public knowledge of that, and belief in its significance, has gone.

We're back to square one – where, unless we make deliberate time to join together with other Christians to discuss our faith, to figure out together what it means in daily life, and to provoke and encourage one another to follow our crucified savior, then we'll never get far down the road of discipleship.

Christianity from the beginning was a team sport – and each of us is the coach for the other: YOU need a coach and someone needs you! (Do you believe that?). This cannot happen in worship alone. Sitting in a pew listening to the preacher, to me or any other, is not sufficient to keep the cross central as a powerful motivating and life-changing factor in our lives: important, but not sufficient.

For our lives to be changed by the cross of Christ, what we need, and what Christians have always done, is to enter into groups with others – like a drug rehab programs, or an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, in which discussion and truth-telling with our peers has power.

So who is it for you? A Sunday School class? A small group? A friend with whom you can share your common faith together?

If Christ has given his life as a sacrifice for us: his life for ours then, we need to respond (says Hebrews 10)!

The Death of Jesus requires:

Third – A New Commitment to Growth in Community:

A new and deliberate decision not to live our life of faith in Christ alone, but together with others in some kind of community. **When are you going to sign up?**

Second – A Godly Confidence:

A new, deliberate, handing over of the imperfections and regrets of your life – real or imaginary – to Jesus Christ as sin and guilt bearer. Listen to his voice as our priest, saying “let me carry all that stuff for you” so you don’t have to.” ***Listen to his voice, and respond today!***

First – A new Covenant Commitment:

A new overt, deliberate, commitment and contract with our Savior. Deliberately giving Jesus authority over our lives as Lord: handing him the keys to your life. **Will you do that?** (Yes, it feels risky, but you’ll never be safer).

“The preaching of the cross,” says St Paul, “is foolishness to those who are perishing. But to those being saved, it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18)

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