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National Presbyterian Church

The Apostle's Creed: "A Change for the Better"

Galatians 5:16-25, 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

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In our sermons in the first few months of this year we're looking together at basic Christian beliefs with the help of one of the oldest and most commonly used summaries of faith – The Apostles' Creed (see www.creeds.net).

If we were following the sequence, given for us in the Creed, we would come today to the section that tells us that after Jesus suffered and died (the issues we have focused on in recent weeks)

He rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, and from there he will come to judge the quick (that is the living) and the dead.

This is a section of the Creed that we're *not actually* going to look at this morning, but rather leave until Easter, and, liturgically, that's the appropriate time to think about "the resurrection" and all that follows after that.

The only thing I'll say this morning is this – that the word "again" (in the phrase, "*he rose again from the dead*") has caused many people over the years, to be perplexed – as if the Creed is implying that Jesus had risen at some other previous time, and then "he rose again – a second time"

The problem is actually a matter of English translation rather than theology. There's no sense of a second resurrection in the original Latin or Greek of the Creed. One way of thinking about it is to think of the phrase "he rose again" in English as simply shorthand for "he rose to life again – life happens twice, not resurrection! And another, just as accurate translation, would be to replace "again" with the preposition "up": "he rose up from the dead."

So we'll come back to this section on *Jesus'* resurrection, and *our* resurrection, at Easter.

BUT today, I'd like us to focus on the next section of the Creed, that speaks about *our belief in God the Holy "Ghost"* – and "Ghost" is simply *an old English expression* for "Spirit."

The Creed is deliberately divided into three sections:

- Section 1 – God the Father – the powerful creator
- Section 2 – God the Son – the dying and rising Christ
- Section 3 – God the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit – *the intimate presence of God, of Jesus the Son, living and active in the world.*

Which is to say that the Creed teaches – *that*

Christian faith is *not a belief* about a Creator who made the universe and then left it alone to *run on its own* (– the view of people like Thomas Jefferson, whom we call deists).

Nor is Christian faith *merely a belief* about a religious teacher who lived 2000 years ago and to whom we look back in history, and claim that his teaching is relevant today (though it is!).

Rather, Christian faith is a belief in the ongoing, life-giving transformative presence of God-made-known-in-Jesus-Christ. God, present and active, both *in the world* as a whole, and *in our lives* in particular.

And *that's* the role of the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost): *to be the intimate presence of God with us and in us!* So that, even though Jesus – God the Son – is no longer with us in flesh and blood, we can still know and follow *the same Jesus* who walked and talked with his friends on earth, 2000 years ago.

Or, to put it another way.

To be a Christian is *not only to acknowledge* that on the cross, Jesus dies for our sins;

To be a Christian is *not only to take a grip of our lives* and hand them back to Jesus as our rightful owner, with our lives bought and paid for by him, by his death – Jesus said that *he “gave his life as a ransom for many”*;

To be a Christian is *not only to make a specific promise* to follow his teaching and example;

BUT

to be a Christian is *to know that we simply can do none of this* without his ongoing presence and help

So that to be a Christian is also *to ask him to come into our lives*, and take up residence within us by the Spirit **so that he can empower us to follow him** .

And this is what he promises to do!

A former archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple,
(who lived about 100 years ago) – put it like this. He said,

It is no good giving me a play like Hamlet and telling me to write a play like that – ***Shakespeare could do it. I cannot.***

And it is no good showing me a life - like the life of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that – ***Jesus could do it. I cannot.***

But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then maybe I could write plays like that.

And if the Spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then perhaps I could live a life like that.

This is the secret (says Wm Temple) of Christian sanctity. To have him as our example is simply not enough. We must have him day by day and moment by moment as our helper (DR: inside us) as well.

In the 15th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus our Lord says the very same thing, using the image of a living plant – in this case a vine. He says:

¹“*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.*

⁴*Abide in me as I abide in you.*

[The word “abide” here has the sense of “take up residence”]

⁴*Take up residence in me as I take up residence in you.*

Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it takes up residence in the vine, neither can you unless you take up residence in me.

⁵*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who take up residence in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing*

NO SAP. NO FRUIT! But when the Spirit is present (Jesus himself, by the Spirit) our lives can be fruitful in all kinds of ways. And that fruit

- *not only includes* satisfaction and happiness; and effectiveness in fulfilling Jesus’ mission in his name;
- *but it also includes* the changing and transformation of our character as individuals as well.

We call it **SANCTIFICATION** – God’s power within us, enabling us to grow to be like Christ!

So, in our scripture reading in Galatians 5, we read of the work of the Spirit – as a passion to create a *Christ-like character* within our lives

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This type of fruit is nothing other than the character of Jesus!

- *Jesus is* loving, joyful, and peace-filled
- *Jesus is* patient, kind and generous
- *Jesus is* faithful, gentle and filled with self-control

And the same thing can be said of Paul’s portrait of Love in 1 Corinthians 13
“Love,” he says

- *is not* envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
- *It does not* insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;
- *it does not* rejoice in wrongdoing,

but rather

- rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

And so too does Jesus:

- *Jesus, too* is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
- *He* does not insist on his own way; he is not irritable or resentful;
- *He* does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
- *He* bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things,
- and endures all things – *even death on a cross out of love for you and me.*

And that’s the image, that’s the character, that God wants to form within you and me, by the presence and transformative power of the Holy Spirit.

BUT HOW? HOW WILL THIS HAPPEN?

Well certainly not in our own strength or by our own effort alone:

So many people have a view of the Christian life as a life primarily of effort and reward:

- Jesus tells us what to do in order to be good people
- The Ten Commandments tell us what to do

and if we apply ourselves hard enough, then God will reward us – for how well we’ve done!!

Now, there’s no question that God wants us to put as much effort into our faith as we possibly can

- We’re to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. That’s effort! “All”!

But no human effort bears any fruit for God (says Jesus), or will be rewarded by God, unless first of all we humble ourselves and admit that even our greatest efforts to follow Jesus are twisted and weakened by sin and pride – and are useless without God’s help; without the presence and power of God’s Spirit; without Christ’s ongoing life around us and within us.

So, before we try our hardest (and bring our best effort to God, which we need to do) we need first to heed God’s call to humble ourselves, hand back our lives to God, and ask for the Holy Spirit to come and take up residence within us.

That’s the first secret of any change for the better, of bearing any fruit for Christ that really matters: God’s presence and power within by the Spirit.

Think of a large car or 18 wheeler truck.

When there’s no gas, and the engine is off, it’s virtually impossible to turn the steering wheel. All the effort in the world is useless! *It’s just too big and heavy!* But when gas *is in* the tank, and the engine is on, then the power steering comes into action.

Not that the steering suddenly takes off by itself, but that when we now put our own effort into the picture ***the extra power kicks in!*** And, in a way that was impossible before, we can now turn the wheel and steer the truck, and it can carry us *in the right direction, to the right destination*

So – the Holy Spirit’s power doesn’t *eliminate or over-ride* our effort, but incorporates our effort, strengthens our effort, makes our effort bear fruit.

Not just in the transformation of our character, but in all kinds of ways making our lives fruitful and helping us fulfill the ministry and mission of Jesus on earth as in heaven.

And it’s not just our effort that the Holy Spirit uses along the way. But, if we let him, the Holy Spirit will enlist and harness all kinds of tools and experiences that can be channels of his presence and power.

So, for example, The Holy Spirit,

Loves to nudge our consciences to pray –

- to pray that Christ’s character becomes our character, and that our lives glorify his name.

And The Holy Spirit

Loves to stir us up to open the Bible and actually read it!

- to read the book that He inspired, and then help us hear it, perhaps for the first time as if God were speaking through it, directly to us.

And the Holy Spirit

Loves to create a hunger for fellowship

- pulling us together with other Christians – drawing us into groups and classes – that He then uses to encourage and challenge us, and hold us accountable to change
 - This morning He’s already been at work stirring us up to gather with others for worship!
 - And perhaps even now, he’s challenging some of you to join a small group!

Indeed, the Holy Spirit loves to use *any and all circumstances of life*

- *the good, the bad and the ugly* – to change us for the better!
- Sometimes the Holy Spirit will make us feel bad!!
 - as if we are in a battle rather than in heaven! (see Gal. 5!)
 - as if we are at boot camp in the military. But, remember: it’s in boot camp that civilians are changed and transformed into soldiers!
- And, then, sometimes, the Holy Spirit will simply place a question in our head through some ordinary experience of life. And that question can niggle away at us until we become a different person.

This was how the Holy Spirit worked in Jack Eckerd’s life!

The late Jack Eckerd was the founder of Eckerd drug store chain (which now - in large part - has become CVS). Mr. Eckerd, was a committed Christian – a Presbyterian, who once said this in an interview:

As my business prospered, I discovered one day that I could drive any car that I wanted, sail any boat that I chose, or go anywhere in the world that interested me.

A lot of people get past material things in the search for satisfaction – and then – most of them get caught in the next trap, power. I don’t mean some evil desire, but just *the everyday reality* that some people direct the activities of others: at first you are the busboy, then the manager, and maybe someday the owner.

On and on it goes, up the ladder until your position in the company gives you a position in the community.

So now the mayor seeks your advice – and one day the governor, or the President calls. *At each level you feel a sense of satisfaction, but it isn’t real. It’s like a narcotic; the more often you take it, the more you need. The desire is never satisfied.*

So (he asks) **“What brings satisfaction?”**

That’s a Holy Spirit question! Prompted not by something bad or hard, but by success!

And the answer he found was a Holy Spirit answer! Simple and Christ-like:

“Helping people.”

Now this may seem straight forward to us, a no-brainer! But to *someone consumed with his own success, caught up in a business that seemed really important, at this moment in his life, for Jack Eckerd, this was a revelation! – a life changing, fruit-bearing and powerful thought, on which he acted; a thought that only gripped him and changed him – after his success.*

- **Circumstances of all kinds**
- **Prayer, Scripture,**
- **Christian Community and Groups,**
- **Worship, Sacraments**
 - all tools in the hands of the Holy Spirit:
The living presence of God empowering us
to make our lives fruitful for Christ
and to change our lives for the better

Do you believe this? And will you act on what you believe?

- (1) That we are – too weak by ourselves to be truly effective for God.
 - We need the humility to ask for help
 - We need Jesus to come and live within us by his Spirit if we're to change and grow?

Do you believe this? And will you act on what you believe?

- (2) That the HOLY SPIRIT does not to replace our effort, but empowers our effort!
- (3) That the HOLY SPIRIT doesn't promise us an easy path, but empower us for the struggle the battle
- (4) That the HOLY SPIRIT doesn't leave us at the mercy of the circumstances of life, but enlists **every circumstance and tool at his disposal**
To make your life and mine fruitful .
To change our lives for the better.

May God help us profoundly to Believe in the Holy Spirit – the Holy Ghost!

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