

## “A New Creed: Part I”

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This morning I am beginning a series of sermons on “A New Creed.” Over the coming weeks my hope is to work through this creed and seek to understand some of what it has to say about our faith. The word “creed” comes from the Latin Credo, which literally means, “I believe.” Creeds are statements of belief. They offer up a basis of identity, help to explain who we are, how we understand the world around us and how we seek to live. Some people may share creeds, while others will take the time to develop their own personal creeds. Years ago I made the acquaintance of a gentleman who in his later years decided to spend the time writing his own Credo. One day, just months before his death he gave it to me to read. His Credo filled a binder and was about 100 pages long. It spelled out in great detail what he believed, how his beliefs had evolved over the years and how his beliefs directed the way he lived, how he approached death and how he understood God. That gentleman, as a former professor of philosophy, was an adherent to Plato’s maxim “That the unexamined life is not worth living.”

I suspect that most of us don’t spend that much time examining what we believe. If I asked for a show of hands this morning and asked who has written out their own personal Credo I wouldn’t expect to see many, if any hands. I also suspect that in this world in which we live, that there are a number of individuals who would say why bother? It doesn’t matter what I believe. But I have trouble with that statement, since almost every one of our actions is predicated on what we believe or what someone else believes. Think about it, casting a vote in an election, making an important life decision, or any decision for that matter...even the choice of getting out of bed in the morning, says something about what we believe and the power of belief in our life.

What we believe not only says something about who we are -beliefs have the power to transform and shape who we become. There is no end to what people can will choose to believe and not to believe in this world, whether they are aware of it or not. As I said, almost every one of our actions and every choice we make, says something about what we believe and

who or what we believe in. And as we know from experience sometimes what we believe doesn't always turn out to be true.

Articulating the truth of the Christian faith and the truth about God has been an important focus of the ones who have gathered to formulate the Creedal statements of the church over the ages. After all, when it comes to reading the Bible or looking to human experience, we could say any number of things about God and manipulate things in such a way to bring about falsehood. I read a story in the news last fall for example about an independent church in upstate New York whose founder wanted to establish a community that would take what the Bible says literally. As a result, behavior in the church became extremely punitive and erratic. They fell into the trap of Biblicism...seeking to live out the traditions and the literal interpretation of Scripture...mostly the Old Testament...yet did not seek a greater understanding and search for the deeper truths that are at the heart of the teachings of Jesus and the Christian faith. But to me that's just laziness. Sometimes that laziness can become dangerous. You see, to do the work of formulating a creed, requires a great deal of understanding and comprehension. It takes time and study. The historical creeds of the church, rely on more than a literal interpretation of a single source or just one person's opinion, in them we discover a faith and a system of belief that has been experienced and lived and tested through lifetime upon lifetime.

Now I know that creedal statements can be sticky for some. There will always be things that we will agree with and other things that can cause us to wonder and doubt. Yet creedal statements, as the German Reformer Martin Luther pointed out, help to serve as supports in our faith. Creeds can do the believing for us when we find it hard to believe...when we find ourselves in doubt...or when we're unsure what to believe. Martin Luther knew all about that as he had his well documented moments of doubt and darkness throughout his life. Yet over time, he and so many Christians have discovered how creeds are there to help point us in the right direction, become the doorways to deeper questions while at the same time, acknowledging some timeless truths. It's not that we have it all figured out, or should have it all figured out. God is too big and too mysterious for us to claim to know all there is to know. It's just that through the course of centuries and centuries of wrestling with the faith, there have

come to light for countless men and women certain teachings, beliefs, truths that stand the test of time and the depth of human experience. Rather than being antiquated or outdated, even today, these beliefs continue to supply, meaning, hope, purpose and make sense of the world for Christians. They remain relevant.

I certainly wouldn't call "A New Creed" antiquated. It may contain some old theological understandings but it was formulated by the United Church of Canada in recent history. It was adopted into the official teaching of the United Church of Canada and became a part of the basis of Union in 2012...the first time anything was ever successfully added to the United Church of Canada's basis of Union -and that is highly significant. Since it's formulation, "A New Creed" has found acceptance and is now included in the prayer books and hymnals of Christian denominations around the world. I continually meet individuals who tell me how meaningful "A New Creed" is for them. For me, as an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada, "A New Creed" is a source of pride.

"A New Creed" begins with the confession that, "We are not alone. We live in God's world. We believe in God who has created and is creating." As a credal statement, these are three very short sentences about the vast subject of Creation and understanding God as the Creator. Whole books have been written on the subject of Creation and more stand to be written. Over the ages there have been great debates when it comes to how the world and the cosmos came into being. It should be noted that the historical creeds of the church actually say nothing about how creation took place. They do however, acknowledge God as Creator. So what does it mean to say that we believe in a God who has created and is creating? Well, I want to focus briefly on three things. They are by no means comprehensive but they are substantial in terms of our relationship to God, to one another and the world around us.

The first thing I would like to focus on is our being. This is one of the theological truths that our scripture reading from Genesis seeks to acknowledge, when it says "in the beginning God created." There is a stated belief that human life and the whole of creation is dependent on God for its beginnings...for life. As the Biblical scholar Marcus Borg noted, the creation stories in the book of Genesis, are not there to give us an historical factual account of how creation happened or how we came into being. These stories exist for the purpose of

communicating to us another kind of meaning as they say a great deal about our “radical dependence” on God who is the source of our being.

To me it goes back to the first two sentence of the Creed that says “we are not alone. We live in God’s world.” To believe that we are alone is to see ourselves as operating independently. If we are meant to be alone as individuals, we believe we are not in need of another. This is the direction human life can take when we fall into believing the myth of our independence...that we are somehow responsible for our own being. Yet the creation stories of the Scriptures acknowledge the reality of our dependence that begins with God. The reality is that we all come from somewhere and from something that goes back to an origin far greater than ourselves.

It’s like the story I shared at our Ash Wednesday service this year. Ash Wednesday is a time that focuses on the fragility and temporary nature of life and our dependence on God for existence. We remember that we are from dust and that it is to dust that we return. Well the story I told was about a group of researchers who had called people together for a great conference because they believe they had discovered the way to create life. As they gathered they announced that by using only a small quantity of dirt, they could create a new life form. At that point in the press conference, God’s voice broke in and announced, “Hold on...you need to make your own dirt first!”

The story reveals to us the truth that there is always something that pre-exists our own existence. That our being is dependent on another, even in our origins. To acknowledge a Creator, and to see ourselves as a part of creation and to understand our “creatureliness” is to realize our dependence. Perhaps more importantly it helps us to appreciate that those around us are also dependent.

Sometimes in life, things can go so well that we can perhaps feel as if we don’t need others or we can do it all by ourselves. We can also start to believe that others should live the same way, and we may just cut them loose...not care...people can get left behind and forgotten. Human community...even the greater community that exists with humans and the whole of creation falls apart. Yet our existence, our being, is rooted in something greater than ourselves. We are not alone...there are others around us who also live in God’s world. Our creed calls us

back not only into a relationship with the Creator but with one another, reminding us of our own shared “creaturliness.” As Paul says in Acts 17, “This is the God in whom we live and move and have our being.”

Now besides being, the second point I would like to make when it comes to confessing in a God who has created and is creating, is to consider the presence of order. Now I’m not referring to what you give your server at the restaurant, or what you take from your boss at work. I am referring to the order given by God through the activity of creation. In the text that Sandra read for us this morning from Genesis we read of a God who creates when the earth “was empty and had no form.” The original Hebrew is more poetic as it reads the earth was “Tohu wa bohu.” The phrase when translated can also mean the earth was “shapeless and formless” or “chaos and desolation.” Something happens in the story when God speaks to transform the chaos and desolation. God’s word brings shape and form.

The separation of the dry land and the seas...the light and the dark...the creatures of the land and the creatures of the air...the rhythm of day and night, the seasons, the years...the creation of humans...the day of rest and so on. The first creation story is about a God who brings order to the cosmos...who brings order to the world...who brings order to human living. For us as Canadians, order is really important. You know how the U.S Constitution confesses the belief in “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The Canadian constitution is one that values “peace, order and good government.” Not that we always have them but we do value them!. I think we all can appreciate that life is easier to live when it has some order and some rhythm to it. It not only allows for some predictability, but it actually makes it easier to live in community with others. Not that we all have to live like some mindless automatons that just fall in line and do what we are told. But the presence of God brings a promise to break through the chaos and confusion that can fill our lives and this world, with something more meaningful and purpose driven.

I remember ministering to a congregation once, where one Sunday a woman introduced herself on her way out the door she said how it was the first time she had been to church. She mentioned how her life was a mess how she was in need of religion. I won’t get into the details of what she shared with me, but she was one who confessed that desire for some order and

sense of rhythm that she knew was lacking in her life. She was experiencing a chaos and was looking for the order, the sacred rhythm that the Spirit of God brings. And so it is for anyone of us when we look at our lives and the world and behold so much of the chaos that exists. Sadly I know that sometimes this is chaos that people have created in the name of God. Yet the Creator we speak of, the one who is still creating, is the one who from the beginning has had a desire and out of love has sought to bring order and rhythm and purpose to this world.

And God as Creator truly has a love for this world. This is something else that is affirmed in the Genesis text this morning. And is the third point I want to make. God declares that the creation and that the creatures in it are good! I think it is no mistake that the creation story that Sandra read comes first in the Bible and then the story about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden comes second. You see, the second story talks about humanity's fall away from God. It's the story that eventually led to the doctrine of "original sin." Yet preceding that story, intentionally if you ask me, the Scriptures attest a God who looks upon the creation and declares it to be good multiple times. Some theologians refer to this as "Original Blessing."

I think we need to affirm the goodness of creation and of all creatures more often than we realize. I know that can be difficult, especially when it comes to certain insects...and certain politicians...but there is a goodness around us that needs to be affirmed. Think of how in life we can hear a hundred words of praise but it's always that one word of criticism that will stick with us. Think about that and then think of all the bad news we hear about the world. We can be surrounded by goodness but the bad news is the stuff that can stick with us. It's easy to start believing the world is a terrible place. The goodness of the world needs to be affirmed.

Not that we look around the world and say that, "It's all good!" We know it's not, but to know the deeper goodness and value of the world can change the way we see the world and see one another. Even when we see the presence of evil and the atrocities that arise in the news. To affirm the goodness of creation gives ways to hope for healing...hope for redemption. We are reminded that it takes eyes of faith to see the inherent goodness of the world. It means believing in a God who has created and is creating.