

03/29/15 - Palm Sunday Year B

“*Symbols of the Church: Believing in the Light: Creeds and Covenants as Symbols*” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Zechariah 9:9-12; Philippians 2:5-11; John 12:12-43

When I was in the 3rd grade, my family moved to Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Once there, my parents decided it would be good for us to join a church. My mom's thinking was that once my sister and I were old enough, we could make our own choices about faith, but between now and then we should have something in which to push against, wrestle with and learn from. My parents were practicing a variation of GK Chesterton's quote, which goes something like: 'When we stop believing in God, we do not then believe in nothing, we believe in anything.' In other words, my parents wanted us to start with something in order to think clearly about what we believe, rather than beginning with nothing at all and assuming we would somehow figure it out. And that is why from the 3rd grade on, we were members in First Congregational Church of Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

When we think of creeds and covenants across the spectrum of the Christian Church, I find it helpful to think of them as symbols of different groups of Christians. The statements in a creed or covenant are meant to be the ground against which this particular group of Christ-followers choose to push against, define themselves by and understand their relationship with God through. The Heidelberg Confession for the Reformed Church; the Book of Concord for the Lutherans; the Catechism of the Catholic Church; the Kansas City Statement of Faith from the early 20th century Congregationalists; the individual covenants of Baptist, Free and Congregational Churches across the United States and world are all symbolic representations of the peculiar perspective of particular Christians.

One creed that is almost universally accepted across all denominational lines is the Apostles' Creed (*creed* is from the Latin *credo*, which means *I believe*). The name is meant to suggest what was believed by all the Apostles of Jesus Christ and was formulated by

numerous churches throughout the Middle East and East in about 180 AD. So let's begin today by reciting the Apostles' Creed, which is on the laminated card in your pew, unless you have it memorized, and then I will tell you why it is important on Palm Sunday:

I believe in God,

the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*

Since we have been speaking of symbols of the church during Lent, on this Palm Sunday, I want us to see our creeds and covenants as another *active symbol* of the church. Active symbols are those symbols which change things when we encounter them. The Apostles' Creed and the Covenant of Rockland Congregational Church are *active symbols* in the sense that they seek to form and change our thinking. Think of these statements as the palm leaves with which we enter into the great city with Jesus Christ. It is how we follow Jesus into the *civitas Dei*, the City of God.

Symbols always point beyond themselves; they refer and influence how we perceive the thing to which they point. How van Gogh portrays the sun in a painting influences how we see the sun when we go outside. I grew up with classical music always playing in the house. One of the pieces I heard the most was Holst's Symphony of the Planets. Now, when I see articles about the planets on the news, I also often hear Holst's symbolic representation of those planets. The music points to the planet, but is not the planet; the music influences what I experience of the planet, however.

The word for symbol comes from the Greek word, *symbolon*, which meant half of a broken object, for example, a seal presented as a token of recognition. The broken parts were placed together to verify the bearer's identity. The symbol of faith, then, is a sign of recognition and communion between believers. *Symbolon* also means a gathering, collection or summary. A symbol of faith is a summary of the principal truths of the faith. (quoted from the Catholic Catechism, Part 1, Sec. 2: 187-188)

The same is true for our encounter with creeds and covenants of the church universal. Most divisions in the Christian church can be traced back to issues with the creeds developed by churches. Churches would take issue with a particular practice or doctrine, and in order to differentiate themselves, they would write a new creed. This is particularly true for Protestants. Our particular tradition, the Congregationalists, saw creeds as tests for being a part of the church. This rubbed our fur the wrong way, since membership in the church, according to the Puritan tradition, was determined by direct personal experience with God - a *converting event*, they called it.

The Puritan tradition developed a strong theology based on *covenants*, instead. Covenants were promises made, rather than tests given. Each gathered community was called to develop their own covenant with God and with one another, in the same way Abraham, Moses and the Israelites, David, the Prophets and the Disciples did. God, of course, is the Prime Covenantor, the first to make promises. An identity built on promises made is Biblical and traceable from Genesis through to Revelation, according to the Puritans.

This is not wrong, but it is also a separating of things that perhaps were never meant to be separated. Deuteronomy 6 says:

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ²so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and

so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This is certainly both a creed and a covenant. The Jewish tradition has always had as their creed verses 4 and 5:

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

But it is a creed based on a covenant, a promise, which is given in verse 3:

³Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Creeds and covenants are symbols which help define the way in which we will love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength. As symbols, the creeds and covenants of the church always point to one place - or at least they should: to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the guide and example for how we enter into a life with God, how we enter into the holy city of God, of which the gathered and covenanted church is also a symbol and example.

The image of how Jesus entered the holy city is portrayed by Philippians 2, which is thought to be a very early hymn of the church, early as in 65-75 AD, only a generation or so after Jesus' death. Philippians 2 is at once a reflection on Jesus and also a call to Jesus' followers to be like him in the same way. So in Philippians 2, we hear how Jesus entered fully into his relationship with us and with God. He *emptied himself* to the point of being *like* a slave. He *became obedient* to the point of death, even death on the Cross. In doing so, Jesus was *exalted, raised up*, by God, and handed over all the authority of God.

Now, notice that even though this is the way Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem, and by extension this is the way we are called to enter our relationship with Jesus - emptying ourselves, serving God with obedience, even to the point of considering it something to die for - the city is where Jesus works all this out. Jesus' emptying and obedience is worked out in conflict: conflict with state authorities, with religious leaders, with resistant crowds. The challenge for each of us when we enter into relationship with a group of people and with God at the same time, is how we will work out these promises we make and things we testify to in our creeds and covenants in such a way that they *glorify the Son of Man, glorify Jesus Christ.*

In other words, given what we have all agreed to with regard to what we believe about God Almighty, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, can we become like the crowds who welcome Jesus with loud Hosannas? Can we struggle with what we believe *in joy and hope?* How will we put together the royal seal, the symbols, which verifies our identity in Christ, the symbols which challenge and call us to be who we truly are in the eyes of God?

In the coming week, Jesus begins his walk to the Cross. On Maundy Thursday, we will celebrate Jesus' last supper with the disciples as a symbol of our participation with them in the body of Christ, the group of people we have chosen to live out our faith life. On Good Friday, the church remembers Jesus' death on the Cross and learns that death is shared by the Holiest of Holies with us. And on Dark Saturday, we participate in the depths of human sorrow and grief as we journey with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, where Jesus walks with us in our sorrow and grief. And then on Easter Sunday, we celebrate Resurrection. The symbols of the church, those active communicators of God's grace, are where we share with one another in word, image, and action the commitments we have made to follow this Son of God and Son of Man. It is how we become Children of Light who believe in the light of God through Jesus Christ.

So let us close by saying together the symbol of our gathered church, the covenant of Rockland Congregational Church. Please stand:

We covenant with God and with one another to seek God's will as taught in the Holy Scriptures, to walk together in the ways of the Lord, to proclaim the gospel of Jesus

Christ to all people, and to depend upon the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth.

Amen