Belief and Living Love

January 26, 2025

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Mark 15: 33-34

John 20: 24-29

This week is the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and this year it commemorates the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea which created the Nicene Creed in 325 CE. We are also marking that tomorrow is the International Holocaust Memorial Day, which the United church collaboration have been building up to the last two weeks. By 325CE, the Christian community, has become recognized by the Roman Emperor, Constantine by the empire. It has become a religion of the state and as such was the beginning of its institutionalization. Some would say this was when the church started to lose it’s way, that it was co-opted by the state and empire. The Christian community was no longer persecuted, which was a good thing, and some would say caused the church to lose its edge.

Constantine called the council to address the theological disputes that divided the church. One of those disputes was what became the Arian heresy, which denied that Jesus was fully divine and a creation of God and therefore was seen as distinct from God. The Nicene Creed states that Jesus was of one substance with the father (God), begotten, not created. While this was very important at the time for the church, many of us would view these issues as less important to our faith today. Belief has become and is becoming less doctrinal and more faith and community based. The United Church created its own creed in 1968, and a more extensive Song of Faith as a statement of faith and belief in 2006. I know the Lutheran Church primarily uses the Apostles Creed as their statement of faith. Within these changes some in and outside of the church are seeking to become more a faithful community and follower of Jesus like the early Christians were before the creedal proclamations. Regardless of whether you believe all that is in the Nicene Creed, it is an important part of our church and faith history.

The scriptures for today are from the resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I will also refer to another gospel reading from our Spill the Beans lectionary to reflect the Holocaust Memorial Day. I wish to draw on some elements of faith that are named in each of these readings that can relate to the Creed and our life together in Christ.

The first reading from Deuteronomy 6 is known as the Shema which translates as hear or listen and names the commandment, to love God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Jesus names this as the greatest commandment, when asked, along with Love your neighbour as yourself. Loving God and neighbour are very important during these times. To love God so fully, we need to love ourselves and our neighbour who are all part of God’s image, God’s creation. We love as God loves us, which is unconditional and follows Jesus’ example of compassion or mercy. Mercy and compassion are basically the same thing. If you have been following the news this week, you have probably heard about the Episcopal Bishop, Mariann Budde of the National Cathedral in Washington who preached a sermon as part of the presidential inauguration. It was a sermon about unity, encouraging us to work toward unity, which doesn’t mean unanimity or even that we all have to agree but we do commit to getting along and treating one another with respect. At the end of her sermon, she spoke truth to power, directly addressing President Trump with the words: "I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. And that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers in this land." She specifically named the groups who are scared and vulnerable because of his executive actions. She spoke with conviction and compassion and exemplified the love of God, as she proclaimed the gospel. A gospel that some unfortunately do not see as the gospel. It is this kind of love of God and neighbour that I believe we are called to live out. And if, as the Nicene Creed proclaims, Jesus and God are one, then our love of God, lived out as Jesus did, is an important part of our faith.

There is a short passage from Mark 15: 33-34 which draws on Jesus’ suffering on the cross: “When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”. After being tried as a criminal for speaking truth to power, sharing the good news for the poor and vulnerable, and challenging the state and religious systems that oppressed the poor, Jesus is crucified. In the midst of the pain and suffering of the brutal torture that crucifixion is, Jesus felt abandoned and cries out: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” It is a cry of despair and suffering that can also be a message to us that Christ is with us in our despair and suffering. Because Jesus suffered, he knows our suffering. I imagine that many who suffered in the Holocaust felt this despair and abandonment. They must have wondered where God was as they were forced into severe labour camps and other painful work, starved, beaten, experimented upon, hung, and herded into gas chambers. I think of a famous quote by Elie Weisel who wrote in his book Night about his experience of the holocaust at the Auschwitz-Birenau concentration camp when he saw a boy hanging in the gallows and a man questioned where God was. After watching the boy struggle between life and death for more than half an hour, Weisel writes that the man asked again: ““Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows. . . .” One could view this as a perspective of the death of God or belief amid such suffering. Or we can take the view that God suffers with us and understands our suffering, as Jesus suffered on the cross and felt abandoned. He was not abandoned however, because God raised him from death to show the world that the way he lived his life, the way he loved and showed compassion was right and good and a blessing. That is the good news for all, that we proclaim in the creed – on the third day he rose again…and is seated at the right hand of God.

The final passage I’ll lift up is the gospel of John and the story of Thomas. Jesus has been crucified and it is the third day after the crucifixion. The disciples have heard from Mary that Jesus is alive and appeared to her, but she is a woman and they probably did not think her account was credible or could be believed. They are still terrified, and gathered in the room together, behind locked doors, for fear that the authorities will come and get them next. Thomas is out of the room, perhaps gone to get some food for them and misses Jesus appearing to the disciples. When he hears their account, he doubts – it is quite unbelievable – and says he must see the marks of the nails and put his fingers in the wounds to believe. Eight days later, Jesus appears to them again with Thomas there and offers them Peace, as he did before. This peace is an affirmation of the importance of peace to Jesus and his followers. That they and we are to live in peace, not retaliation or retribution against those who crucified Jesus or anyone who has wronged us. Even after such suffering, Jesus is committed to nonviolence.

It turns out Thomas doesn’t need to touch Jesus’ wounds, but in witnessing Jesus’ presence and hearing him invite Thomas to touch his wounds, Thomas proclaims, “My Lord and my God” a profound statement of faith. He believes. And Jesus says “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”. For many, this has been seen as a rebuke to Thomas who had to see to believe. But what if it is a statement for those who did not have the privilege to see Jesus in their early community and believed because of the witness of the disciples? What if it is for us who all these years later believe without seeing Jesus. We who believe, in whatever form that takes, continue to seek to be faithful followers of Jesus, and his way. We may not believe all the words in a creed, or the doctrines of the church, but we follow the Jesus who lived and loved, showed compassion to the vulnerable and outcast, who died for what he believed in and lives again through the power of God’s love and grace.

On this week of prayer for Christian Unity, may we work towards a unity that sees beyond doctrinal and creedal differences to find ways to work and be together in the common cause of love and justice. There is much we can do together in living out our faith and calling, to love God and love our neighbour, that can bring us together in Christ. Things like making meals for the warming centre; working together to end houselessness; supporting 2SLGBTQ folk in the community; supporting refugees, and so much more. As we seek to find hope and care for the poor, the vulnerable and God’s creation in these days, may it be so.