

"I believe in God the Father"

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne June 17, 2007

Reading from the Psalms (103:13-14,17 NLT)

*The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him.
For he understands how weak we are; he knows we are only dust.
But the love of the Lord remains forever with them
His salvation extends to the children's children.*

God is Infinite

Reading from the book of Job (NLT)

Then the Lord answered Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much. Do you know how its dimensions were determined and who did the surveying? Who defined the boundaries of the sea as it burst from the womb? Have you ever commanded the morning to appear and caused the dawn to rise in the east? Have you explored the springs from which the seas come? Have you walked about and explored their depths? Where does the light come from, and where does the darkness go? Have you visited the treasures of the snow? Have you seen where the hail is made and stored? Do you know the laws of the universe and how God rules the earth? Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?"

Then Job replied to the Lord, "I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers? I will put my hand over my mouth in silence. I have said too much already. I have nothing more to say."

Reflection: It's hard to argue with someone who really knows it all. I'm not talking about someone who thinks they know it all. You've met people like that I'm sure. Here we listen in as Job and his friends try to understand the mysteries of creation. They struggle to find useful answers to the big questions of life like, why do good people suffer, of why does God allow evil in the world, and does God have a plan for the world. They argue with each other. They try to argue with God. By the end of the book of Job God shows up and interrupts them. He says something like, "Hey, where were you when I made everything from scratch? If you can tell me all about creation, then maybe I'll answer some of your other questions." Well, that's not really a fair test. How could any of us know all that God knows? God is infinite. But uh, I guess

that's the point. God's ways are simply beyond our ability to understand. How could we possibly know everything about God? It would be like trying to see everything in the universe at the same time. You can't do it. Your eyes focus only in one direction. Only Moms, I'm told, have eyes in the backs of their heads. But even so, they can't see everything. Some things remain hidden. Go up to the highest mountain, and look into the distance, but you will not be able to see everything that's there. Use a microscope, a telescope and a whole set of satellite intelligence networks. You will still not be able to see everything. Face it, the universe is too big. And that's just for starters ... because Christians believe God is bigger than that. No wonder it is so hard to know about God or to understand him. He's simply indescribable. Yet, though I can not know all about him, I can still know him. And that's what matters.

Insert worship music here

God is Intimate

Reading from the letter to the Ephesians

(5:1-2,4:30 The Message)

Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that ... Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted.

Insert worship music here

Intro to the message: Good morning and welcome to our new series of messages called Christianity 101. Don't let the name fool you. Some of you may want to jump ahead to a more advanced series. Maybe you'd like us to cover the deeper mysteries of how ecclesiology and Christology are connected, or what light modern process theology can shed on the teleological assumptions of the coming parousia. If questions like that interest you, please come back next week when Frazier is preachin' ... No, actually, it may seem too basic to talk about the basics of faith, but that's where everything starts. Each week as we look at a different part of the basic creed of our faith, I will also ask the big question: "What difference does any of this make to me?" You know, if your beliefs don't change your behavior, what good are they?

Most weeks during our worship service we recite the words of the Apostles' Creed. Those words, by legend, have come down to us from the first followers of Jesus, and the legend tells us that each of the Apostles contributed one of the lines. A deeper and more mysterious creed also common to the church was hammered out through a long meeting of bishops in a place called Nicea years later in 325. That Nicean Creed is also repeated in churches around the world every week. So ... why do these creeds matter? Why can't we just accept whatever the Bible says? First, even Christians who like each other and agree about most things can't come to a single interpretation of the Bible. That's why creeds were considered important. They helped the church describe simply what it believed about God. But you also need to know that the Bible, while written and compiled over a period of some 50 or 60 years starting at least 20 years after Jesus died on the cross ... well, the Bible itself did not exist as an official book until the same folk who gave you the creeds in 325 decided which books and letters would be in and which writings (like the odd Gospel of Thomas for example) would be out. Way out. So for the church, the creeds are every bit as old and authoritative as the Bible. The Apostles' Creed may even predate a couple of the books of the Bible itself.

What's it matter? Well, things have not changed a lot from how the church and the world got along 2000 years ago. Back then some people who said they were Christians taught things that were the opposite of what most other Christians taught. That kind of thing gets confusing. Who's right? Both can't be. The Church can't say Jesus was just a good teacher and say he was the Son of God at the same time without there being problems. There were also political power struggles within churches. It seemed good back then, just as it seems good to me now, for the Church to be clear about what it believes. Many church leaders today prefer not to have things so clear. They've said they prefer an ongoing discussion about whether Jesus was born of a virgin or if he really rose from the dead. They want to leave open whether God actually created the heavens and the earth now that we believe in big bangs and

evolution. It seems to me they want to be able to recite the creeds as a religious tradition, but not as a real belief. That's odd to me, like saying something out of one side of your mouth and something else out of the other. Not me. I at least will be clear about what we believe as Christians and why.

It seemed good back then, just as it seems good to me now, for the Church to be clear about what it believes. Many church leaders today prefer not to have things so clear. Not me. I at least will be clear about what we believe as Christians and why.

And please, remember why. Your beliefs will change your behaviors. If you really believe them, that is. There's a story about a fellow who retired from the military after a very long career. He entered the private, corporate world, but had a hard time giving up his previous habits. He had a certain way of doing things he believed best. Only his new boss did not share his beliefs. And the boss wanted him to behave differently. After the first month, the boss pulled the older man aside and asked, "Do you realize you show up late every day? I can't imagine you got away with that in the navy. What did people say to you when you came in late to the office?" The older gentleman answered, "Well, they simply

stood up when I came in and said, 'Good morning, Admiral.'" Yup, beliefs and behaviors have a funny way of being connected.

Now it should be obvious that I'm not the person you want making the final decisions about what can be believed and what is not true. No one died and left me in charge here, certainly not Jesus. When it comes to the church, we believe things together, in common. That's why the church has for centuries has left these kinds of decisions up to the broadest possible consensus, listening to the voices of Christians from around the world, and also to the echo of voices still heard in the traditional teachings of those who have gone before us. The creeds have been one of those voices we hear from long ago. But it's a voice that continues to speak to us, as millions of people repeat these words in faith each week. When you and I say these words together we show how our individual beliefs become stronger when shared. Like this:

Insert the Apostles' Creed here

You'll see it all begins with saying, "*I believe in God the Father.*" Now that's a good thing for us to talk about today, since it is Father's Day. What's it mean to say you believe in God the Father?

I know some folk have a hard time with that idea. Maybe you're one of them. You remember how your father was not there, or he was but he wasn't loving or kind. Maybe you came from an abusive family, or maybe your Dad worked so long and hard you never saw him. To say God is like your father isn't saying much. But that's not what the Creed means. The creed does not intend to say God is like your father. God is so much bigger than anything a human could be. If there's any comparison here, you're better off saying in some small way, your father reminded you of God. Otherwise to say God was like

your father is like saying I'm like George Clooney. It's true we're both Americans, we're both males. After that any other likeness is very small.

Of course, we know something about what makes a father good at his job. There is something that all fathers are supposed to do. It's in the job description. We're supposed to love our children. That's not always easy for guys. Maybe you came from a family where Dad did not show his emotions very much. You may have grown up thinking that's just how men act. We don't hug or talk about feelings, and we most often show love just by being good providers. So, as a public service announcement this morning, here's a little reminder for you dads out there that there are a lot of ways to show love to your kids. In fact, there must be fifty ways to say "I love you."

Insert video: 50 ways to say I love you (Bluefish TV)

Yup, we need a bit of help learning how to show our love. But that's not something that God has had trouble with. God has shown his love in many ways. He's also shown his power in many ways. That's a funny thing about the God we worship as Christians. He is both all powerful, as we say in the creed he's the creator of heaven and earth. And yet at the same time we call him all loving, the God and father of us all. On one hand he's infinite, way beyond us. On the other hand, he's intimate with us, right beside us. Now that takes some doing, to be both of those at the same time. (It's kind of like that old beer commercial where guys argued: "Tastes Great! Less Filling!") Could it be the only way you could be all powerful would be to show up and be with the children you love, not leaving them on their own to get into trouble, or leaving them without any sense of being loved, or worse yet, abusing them. Anyone can abuse great power, but it takes an even greater power to use restraint. There's not much power in getting angry or punishing others, not as much power as it takes to forgive and heal and work for peace. Yeah, it may take a whole lot of power to cause a really big bang, but that's nothing with the power it takes to make an impact on the lives of individual believers.

Intimate and infinite at the same time. OK ... that leaves us with today's big question: "What difference does that make to me?" Since beliefs must shape behaviors, what's different in my life because I believe in a God who is both all powerful and yet intimately concerned with me? That's a fair question. It deserves a good answer. I once heard a famous preacher put it this way. He asked the question, "When was God at his best?" How would you answer?

Was God at his best when he created the heavens and the earth? The Bible tells us God spoke and things were created

from nothing. Consider all the galaxies and universes, the millions of stars and the far reaches of unknown space. Think about all the laws of science and how they fit together. Surely God did a very good thing in creation.

Or was God at his best when he created man and woman? The human body is an intricate system, of nerves and bones of mind and soul. It's hard to believe we are who we are by accident. So perhaps God was at his best when he gave us breath ...

Or perhaps God was at his best when he came to be born of a virgin in a manger. That was not something that had been done before. And certainly no other religion believes in a God so powerful he chooses to join his creation and be born as a simple servant in a backward time and place. To cover the distance from beyond time and space to a specific person in a particular moment must have been one time when God was at his best.

Or was God at his best when he healed a man born blind? Or forgave a woman caught in adultery? Was God at his best as he touched people's hearts and changed their lives? Was God at his best in the simple words spoken on a hillside, "Blessed are those who are peacemakers ..."

Intimate and infinite at the same time. OK ... that leaves us with today's big question: "What difference does that make to me?"

Certainly when you think about it, God was at his best when he let evil men beat him and nail him to a cross and torture him and mock him ... He could have stopped the whole thing at any time, could have come down from the cross. He could have punished, but instead he forgave. And then he died to show us the only way he could that death was not the end of life.

Or was God at his best when he rose again from the dead? That must have been it. In that moment, God defeated death's hold over every future generation. "Now we need not fear the grave, Jesus Christ has come to save." How is it that dead flesh could come back to life, not by being resuscitated but by being made new. That was the biggest day of all history and a day on which God was certainly at his best.

But, no. That's not it. I can tell you when God was at his best. It was a Sunday afternoon, in April, 1976. That's when God did something truly amazing. That's when God reached down and touched my heart. The Lord and creator of all things, the eternal God who has seen kingdoms come and go, who heard the prayers of millions of voices, who had lived and died and lived again, this God heard my prayers as I knelt and cried and asked for his forgiveness. He listened as I said I would trust him with my life ... and he forgave me and loved me and welcomed me and healed me. He filled me with his Spirit that day and I will never forget it. And I know that, that day, that day of all days, I know for myself was when God was at his best.

I wonder where I would be today if God had not touched my heart that Sunday afternoon 31 years ago. Where would I be now? How many lives would I have touched in different ways or how many people would I have hurt? Would I be living

without hope, doing my best to do my own thing, and yet missing the thing that matters most? You can ask what difference it makes to you that the God of all things, the infinite God can come down and be as close to you as anyone can be. Well, I can tell you to me it has made all the difference in how I live. I have hope when times get tough, and courage to keep going no matter what. I know God has changed my life. I have been fortunate to see how God can use me to help touch and change other people's lives too. The same thing can happen to you, because when your life is changed for the better, you have the power to change the lives of people around you, even strangers, even enemies. But it all starts when you trust that the God of all things is also the God of small things ... and the God who is infinitely large can be intimately involved in your life.

Can I explain it? Heck no, I can barely believe God would do such a thing. But I do believe it, even though I can't understand it. But then, why should I be able to understand it all? My mind is finite ... and God is infinite. Why would I ever assume I could understand God fully? It would make as much sense as thinking I could hold the ocean in this cup. Not going to happen.

But not being able to understand God won't stop you from being changed by God. Whether you have trusted God with your life long ago or you made a final decision to trust God last week ... it doesn't matter. The changes God makes in your life are ongoing. So too is the challenge to let God use you to change others. Here's one basic part of our faith you never outgrow, no matter how long you've been a Christian. Tomorrow you will always be able to trust God more than you

do today, you will always have opportunities to help others find God in their lives in each new day.

Folks, none of this depends on what you know, but on what you believe. Faith is not getting all the right answers so much as it is becoming the right person. When you say the words of the creed you aren't trying to pass a test, you're professing your trust. Faith has to do with choosing to believe, deciding to trust in God before you have all the evidence or proof. That's OK because beliefs really matter. Your beliefs change your behavior. Let me ask you, was it what Martin Luther King knew from his studies that changed the world? Or was it what he believed in his heart? It was his beliefs, to be sure. Believing in a God who's near to me and intimately aware of my needs means I choose to live differently. I choose to ask what God wants and not focus solely on what I want. I look for God's guidance when I want to know how to build stronger relationships with my wife or my kids, with my neighbor. I measure success differently because I trust God with my future. How about you? How do you measure success in life? And what about death? Can you look at death differently, without the same kind of fear you would have if you did not trust God? I know for me, all these things changed because God changed me. He keeps changing me day by day ... Now the question is what will God change in you this week? Whatever lays ahead for you this week, it can all be different as you trust in a God who is intimate enough to know you by name and care for you, yet powerful enough to not only create heaven and earth, but to reach down and touch you and heal you and save you. "For the love of the Lord our Father remains forever with us, and his salvation extends even to our children's children ..."
[Psalm 103:13-14,17 NLT]