

Sunday, December 14, 2025

Sermon "1,700 Years of the Nicene Creed"

Romans 15:4-13 NRSVUE

Where we're going in today's sermon: We have received a 1,700-year-old invitation, but it's not too late to RSVP.

In the year 325, there was a fight in the church. It was a major disagreement, one that threatened to split the Christian community in half. The division wasn't caused by the style of music or color of the carpet in the sanctuary.

No, the fight was caused by a disagreement about the nature of Jesus Christ.

Some considered Jesus to be a creation of God, made by the Creator before the beginning of time. Others said no - Jesus is God, and Jesus the Son is coeternal with God the Father. Because of this disagreement, the cities of the Roman Empire were disturbed by riots. Heated battles were breaking out between opposing sides. Bishops from the "Jesus is God" side were exiled from their posts and replaced by bishops from the "Jesus is not God" side.

All of this made the emperor Constantine very nervous. He did not want a split in Christianity, so he called for a council to resolve this theological division. Church leaders gathered in Nicaea, a location in modern Turkey now called Iznik.

Religion News Service reports that "318 bishops deliberated on controversies on the nature of Christ, both human and divine, and agreed on a statement of faith still known today as the Nicene Creed."

The Nicene Creed is the oldest of our universal Christian statements of faith. It came out of the council of Nicaea, held exactly 1,700 years ago, and it defines God as one entity appearing in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus is not a creation of God, says the Nicene Creed. No, he is "begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father." And the Holy Spirit is equally God. The creed says that the Spirit is "the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified."

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One God, three persons.

Today we call it “the Trinity.”

In addition, the council of Nicaea created 20 new church laws, one of which prohibited clergy from castrating themselves. Apparently, it had become a bit of a fad. Then, at the end of the council, the leaders of the “Jesus is not God” group were sent into exile.

1,700 years have come and gone. Some things change, some things remain the same, such as disagreement about the nature of Christ.

So, what can we learn from the Nicene Creed?

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul says, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (15:4). In this verse, he is talking about Holy Scripture, but the creeds of the church have many of the same qualities. They are written for our instruction. They encourage us. And they give us hope.

As Paul says, “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction” (v. 4).

The Nicene Creed can encourage us. The creed “is so darn beautiful!” says philosophy professor Phillip Cary. It tells us that the Father “has never been without a Son he loves. He has always given all of his divine essence to the Son. That’s gorgeous, and it’s also really important for Christian faith.”

It is encouraging to discover that love and generosity are at the heart of who God is. Love and generosity are shown by the Father to the Son, and to us as well.

In addition, the Nicene Creed can give us hope. Suzanne Nicholson, a professor at Asbury University, admits that the Trinity is hard to understand. But the creed gives us hope, because it shows us the beauty of God and draws us into a deeper relationship with God. The beauty of God “is revealed in the Trinity,” she says. “Why would I want to know less of that? I want to know more of God. We know more of God so we can glorify God more fully.”

Instruction about the Trinity, encouragement about who God is and hope in our relationship with God. All are found in the Nicene Creed.

Paul goes on to talk about “Christ Jesus” and “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and he concludes with the encouraging words, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (vv. 5, 6, 13).

Paul says a lot about God when he talks about Christ Jesus, God the Father and the Holy Spirit. But Paul never uses the term “Trinity.” The word “God” appears 4,761 times in the Bible, “Jesus” is named 1,092 times, but “Trinity” appears not once. Although there are hints of a triune God in the Bible, Christians did not start talking about the Trinity until the middle of the second century. An understanding of the Trinity was developed when Christians needed to explain the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is all about a loving relationship, and it is beautiful. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, the Father loves the Spirit, the Spirit loves the Son ... round and round again. The essence of God is a loving community, three divine persons in eternal relationship with one another. They love each other, they love us, and they invite us to love them and love one another.

“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another,” says Paul to the Romans, “in accordance with Christ Jesus” (v. 5). Paul knows that God is not interested in condemning, but in encouraging us to live in harmony with one another, just as God the Father lives in harmony with the Son and the Holy Spirit. God enters into a relationship with us so that together we may “with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 6).

Each of us is invited to live in harmony and to glorify God. In the words of the Nicene Creed, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life ... who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.”

God desires this kind of love, harmony and praise because relationship is at the heart of the Trinity. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three persons in an eternal relationship. John of Damascus, a Greek theologian of the seventh century, came up with an

understanding of the Trinity based on perichoresis, a Greek word meaning “dancing around,” as in the choreography of a ballet.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not like three kings on three thrones, but instead are like three dancers holding hands, dancing together in perfect love, freedom and harmony. They are deeply one, but at the same time, they are three. They are what they are in relation to each other - in a shared purpose, and in a mutual love, for all eternity. For God, ultimate reality is found in relationship. It's all in the family.

That's the key to our relationship with the Trinity. Our Lord invites us to enter into relationship with the Trinity, to join the Lord's never-ending dance, and to become part of God's family. We are not asked to understand the Trinity perfectly, but instead to join the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in their perichoresis. Such an understanding can unite us as Christians, especially as we struggle with divisions in our country and our world.

The challenge for us in 21st century America is to turn off the computer or television and find joy in people instead of technology. Growth will come as we commit ourselves to doing the hard work of making peace, instead of giving up on others and trusting only in ourselves. Closeness to God will be experienced as we accept the invitation to join the dance of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with hope and joy.

The Trinity lives in an eternal relationship of joy, peace and hope, which is why Paul says, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (v. 13).

That is exactly the kind of relationship that the Nicene Creed invites people to enter, with God and with each other. Alleluia, Amen.