

Sermon preached May 17, 2015
Ascension Sunday
Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

There once was a Boston brokerage house which had a job opening and so it advertised for a “young Harvard graduate or the equivalent.” Among the inquiries responding to the post was one from a Yale grad. He asked, “By ‘equivalent,’ do you mean two Princeton grads, or a Yale graduate part time?”

Imagine dropping off your son at college his freshman year. You’ve unloaded the boxes and suitcase into his dorm room, met his roommate, and just took him out for a last lunch before jumping in the car for the long ride home. What would you say? “Goodbye, son.” Well, yes, but perhaps a bit more than that. Some parting words of wisdom. Something like, “Study hard, don’t forget to call home once a week, make friends, don’t party too much, and I’m proud of you!” You summarize the most critical pieces of information and share them just before leaving. That’s exactly the sort of thing Jesus is doing in the gospel.

Thursday was Ascension Day, 40 days after Easter, but 10 days before Pentecost: the day Jesus Ascended into heaven. We are celebrating this Holy Day today. After his resurrection Jesus taught and met with his disciples for a while, and explained to them the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. Now he is about to leave and he tells them that they are to wait in Jerusalem for

the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But just before he ascends, Jesus, like a good parent who is dropping off their child at college, gives the disciples a quick reminder of the most critical pieces of information.

- 1) The scriptures said the Messiah was supposed to suffer, die, and resurrect.
- 2) There is a coming Kingdom of God.
- 3) Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.
- 4) The Holy Spirit will come upon you in Jerusalem, after which you should be proclaiming Jesus, this repentance and forgiveness of sins, and the Kingdom of God.

Ever since then, churches have been coming up with summaries of what they believe the most important features are, of the coming of Jesus to earth. What's most important thing to believe? What's the most important to understand? What is necessary for a Christian to know and what isn't, or what is optional? If you had to call over your shoulder to a group of disciples what the essence of Christianity is in just a few words, what would you say?

Interestingly, different churches would answer that question differently. Some churches would say what Jesus said, something to the effect of "proclaim Jesus, forgiveness of sins, and the Kingdom of God." Some churches would say the summary of the gospel is "prevent abortions and gay rights." Some churches would say it is, "feed the hungry and help the poor and oppressed." Some would say it is, "Force everyone to be Christians and accept Jesus as their

personal Lord and Savior or they are going to hell.” Some would say the summary of the gospel is, “Stop all wars and everyone become a pacifist.”

The early church wrestled with this question, and after years of discernment, prayer, and Bible study, in the year 325 all the known churches of the world came up with a statement to summarize the essential doctrines of Christianity. It is called the Nicene Creed. We recite it every Sunday.

Generally speaking, in the Episcopal Church, we say the essentials, the non-negotiables, of the faith are found in the Nicene Creed. Everything else is open to negotiation within scriptural interpretation. Is it moral or immoral for the U.S. to be involved in war in the Middle East? The answer to that is not found in the Creed therefore, using scripture, tradition, and reason, Christians can faithfully debate this. Should abortion be legal or not? The answer to that is not found in the Creed therefore, using scripture, tradition, and reason, Christians can faithfully debate this.

When I lived in Baltimore I became friends with a male priest who strenuously opposed the ordination of women. But we both liked each other and had some great conversations. He even invited me to preach at his church, although he wouldn't let me celebrate the Eucharist. I disagreed strongly with his interpretation of scripture regarding women's ordination, but I never doubted his faithfulness as a Christian. An opinion about women's ordination is not in the Creed.

Some Christians like clear-cut boundaries of what to believe. They like to know who is in and who is out. If you don't believe exactly like they do, they say you aren't a Christian. Jesus didn't operate that way. There was no litmus test for Jesus. In fact, he first proclaimed his identity not to a Jewish male, but to a Samaritan women. He healed not only Jews, but the daughter of a Roman soldier. These were people who didn't believe what Jews believed, much less what Jesus believed, but they were accepted by Jesus.

The problem comes when churches take the important, yet non-essential, stuff and confuse it with essential doctrine. For instance saying, "if you don't believe as I believe about gay rights, divorce, social justice, abortion, women's ordination, gun laws, and the Democratic or Republican parties, then you aren't a real Christian and you are going to hell."

It's no wonder non-Christians look at us and scratch their heads!

Fortunately, the Episcopal Church is not a doctrinal church. Don't confuse essentials with non-essentials. We find unity not in doctrines, but in worship and relationship. You don't even have to believe every single thing in the Nicene Creed to be accepted into St. John's! Worship here and develop relationships with God and each other. Open your heart to what you learn and experience. We trust that through your spiritual journey, over time, many of the things about which you are skeptical will become clearer, and you will come to know Christ more fully.

There's a famous quote by an Anglican Archbishop of the 17th century who spoke about this matter. He wrote, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

The Episcopal Church also believes that the Holy Spirit who Jesus sent to the disciples, and gives to all of us who are baptized, will lead us into new truths. I'd like to read you a wonderful quote from a book called Welcome to the Episcopal Church, by Christopher Webber.

“Uniquely among the churches, the Anglican vision from the very beginning has been not centered so much on organizational unity or doctrinal unity as on a community united in worship... As the church moves through history, new challenges arise and old answers become inadequate. Jesus did not tell his disciples that he had left them with all the answers, but rather, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). So the discovery of truth is a continuing journey guided by the Holy Spirit, and the answers we find are always provisional answers. They may have been satisfactory in the past but that offers no guarantee that they will be equally satisfactory in the future. Jesus himself is the truth, but statements about Jesus will not necessarily be able to capture the whole of that truth in terms that a changing society needs to hear. Likewise the structures of the church that have been vastly different in different periods of the church’s history may need to be further changed to meet the needs of a new millennium.”¹

The essentials remain the same: Jesus is God, he lived, died and rose again, God’s Kingdom is coming, repent and be forgiven. These parting words of Jesus to his disciples at his ascension compose the main points of the Nicene Creed. At the same time, further truths are still being revealed.

¹ “The Anglican Vision”, Found in Welcome to the Episcopal Church, By Christopher L. Webber

The Episcopal Church has a gift of being able to hold these tensions together. We can disagree and discuss and discern about non-essentials, guided by the Holy Spirit, (as we should!) and yet we can still come together as the family of God, worship together, proclaim and live the Nicene Creed. Unity not in doctrine, but in worship and relationship with God and each other. Amen.