

Scripture Lesson: Colossians 1:15-23

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 188-189

¹⁵ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. ²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, ²³ provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a minister of this gospel.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!**Special Music:** *"The Nicene Creed"* by Stephen Dean – Peg Wilken, Terry Moon, Bryan Latimer = Trio

Colossians 1:15-23

08/10/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

The Nicene Creed, Week 1: "True God from True God"

Pastor Amy Terhune

This morning, we begin a three-part sermon series on the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed is printed in your blue United Methodist Hymnals on page 880, if you'd like to see the words as we talk about them. The original creed was written in the summer of 325 A.D. in Nicaea, which is located in the present day Iznik, Turkey, in the language of the Roman Empire at that time, which was Greek, NOT Latin. The western church based out of Rome gradually made the shift to Latin in the second half of the 4th century, but in the 320s, everyone was still writing official church documents in Greek. Does that matter? Yes, but you'll have to wait for me to explain it a little further on in the sermon. There are many English translations available to us. For our purposes, I'm using the translation officially accepted by the United Methodist Church. This summer, the creed turns 1700, and given its enormous historical importance in determining the orthodox or sanctioned, accepted, approved, traditional teachings of the church, I think it merits a few weeks of study.

When I was in seminary, there's an old joke about graffiti left on a bathroom stall in one of the hallowed halls of Boston University School of Theology, which supposedly went like this:

"And Jesus spoke unto Peter saying, 'Who do people say that I am?' And Peter answered, 'Thou art, according to Paul Tillich, the very ground of our being. Thou art Immanuel Kant's deontological categorical imperative, the ultimately determinative one. Thou art the Christ, God-incarnate, *homoousia* with the Father, God from God, light from light, begotten not made, having two natures in a hypostatic union yet not confusing the two'. And Jesus looked at Peter and saith, 'What?'"

That little joke has always made me laugh, but the truth is that people have been confused about who Jesus is since he first arrived on the scene some 2,025 years ago now, give or take a few.

Perhaps revealed by the popular Christmas Song, there is quite a bit of scriptural debate about how much Mary knew about Jesus, and when. Shepherds, magi, disciples, crowds, Pharisees and Sadducees – scripture is relatively clear that none of them had a full picture. Peter declares Jesus to be the Christ but won't hear tell of crucifixion and death. Even good old Paul, the great theologian and premier evangelist, struggles with how to put into words who Jesus is. In today's lesson we hear, "Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.... For in him, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Which may leave you in the same place as our joke this morning: What? Is Jesus creator or created? Come on, Paul!

And Jesus in scripture isn't as much help as we might hope. In John's gospel, Jesus stresses that fact that he and the Father are one, but in both Mark and Luke's gospel, when Jesus is approached by the rich young ruler, who asks, "good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies, "Why do you call me good. No one is good but God alone." Suggesting some kind of distinction. John Wesley is famous for teaching that scripture contains all things necessary for salvation. In other words, scripture tells us as individuals how to be born again. And it instructs the church, the people of God, on how to be part of Christ's ongoing work building the Kingdom of God among us here and now. The salvation of self and social order is scripture's focal point. The exact nature of who Jesus is and how God works in him has always been colored with broad streak of mystery, although we humans love to try to talk it out anyway.

Not wishing to be guilty of any hint of plagiarism this morning, I'm indebted to the work of Michael Carpenter, Taylor Burton-Edwards, and Phillip Cary, each of whom have written extensively about the Nicene Creed, and whose research has been invaluable to me in constructing this series.

It starts off simply: We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. This is not a newflash. If you've read Genesis or studied scripture at all, you know there is ONE God and that God created everything, from the sub-atomic particles that make up every cell to the furthest reaches of the universe. That's why there's only one sentence. They agreed. It wasn't complicated. But then we get to Jesus.

Let me start with the first phrase. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ. In English, the term Lord comes from the old English *hlaford* or "loaf-ward". The lord was the Keeper of the Bread, the one in charge of the resources. For most of human history, human lords have been plentiful. Every region had a lord, and every lord had subjects that owed him allegiance to get their bread. But what happens when there's ONE Lord, one Adonai (in Greek)? If Jesus is the one Lord, then Caesar is not. If Jesus is the one Lord, then the emperor is not. If Jesus is the one Lord, then the King is not. If Jesus is the one Lord, then no human leader is – no monarch, no prime minister, no president. Don't underestimate the audacity of that statement. It is very much political. Jesus is the Lord. He's the Keeper of the Bread. Actually, he is the bread – the bread of life, the giver of all that is, the one in charge of the resources. And it's worth noting that if Jesus is Lord, then the king and the emperor and president aren't. And neither am I. If Jesus is Lord, we're not. We're subjects, servants, whose primary allegiance is not to the King or the nation, but to the Lord. A lot of people in history, and a lot of people right now want us to equate a human leader with God's Lordship, and that is heresy.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ. He is the only son of God eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father, through him all things were made. Wowzers, that's a lot of words, and they're very poetic and pretty they way they flow from one to the next. But what's the point? For this, we need a history lesson. If that's not your thing, indulge me. I'm going to try to keep it interesting.

Christians faced terrible persecution in the first three centuries of Christianity's existence. Roman Pagan religion was intricately woven into their society, and early Christians rightly refused to

participate. Roman society made room for all kinds of gods. It was always willing to welcome another to the mix. But as we've said, Christians follow one Lord. They weren't willing to let God be just another deity alongside all the others. So Christians avoided public festivals, holding office, military service, and other institutional practices that held society together at the time. Conversions tore families and communities apart. Thus, Christians were widely unpopular with the general public, and most of the persecution happened when communities felt threatened or upended. It was, of course, illegal to be any religion but the state religion, but leaders didn't generally persecute unless the population was whipped into a frenzy. Most of the early persecution was destruction of property, loss of rank or status, or imprisonment. This isn't to say that there wasn't killing go on, because there certainly was, but not on a mass scale. That is, until Emperor Diocletian came to power in the 280s A.D. Diocletian despised Christians, and he passed a series of edicts that targeted those who would not sacrifice to Roman gods or participate in the festivals. Thousands were martyred under Diocletian.

In the mid 290s or so, Diocletian divided power between himself and three friends from his military days, and they became known as the Tetrarchs – four leaders tied together by blood, marriage, and friendship. Alas, nothing destroys friendships like a taste of real power. Diocletian was eventually ousted, and a guy named Galerius took his spot. The tetrarchs warred with one another, their sons succeeding them, which is how it came to pass that Constantine came to a tetrarchal throne in 306 AD. He was smart, well organized, charismatic, and pragmatic. He separated civil and military authority; he actively combatted inflation by restructuring the monetary system and promoted people who showed promise regardless of political persuasion or familial ranking. Eventually, he defeated the other three tetrarchs to consolidate power again in the hands of one ruler.

And that's when he turned his attention to religion. It is not clear just how faithful or how sincere his religious convictions were, but he recognized in Christianity an ethic that he thought would create a kinder and better social order. And in 323 or early 324 A.D, he declared Christianity to be the new state religion of the Roman Empire. He was baptized and became the very first Holy Roman Emperor. However, as Christianity began to enjoy new status under Emperor Constantine, fault-lines, fissures, and theological disparities within the church were exposed, and in many cases, the divergent teachings were incompatible with one another.

There was a priest in Alexandria, Egypt name Arius, and Arius was concerned about ensuring that Christianity remained monotheistic. In other words, there's only one God. Remember, they're fighting centuries of entrenched polytheistic culture at that time. In Arius' heart, he believed that Jesus had divine spark, but that Jesus' divinity was derivative, subordinate, less, and that Jesus came on the scene after creation. Arius' bishop – a guy named Alexander (in Alexandria – try to keep that straight!) – did NOT agree. He believed Jesus was the same essential nature as God; that Jesus was God made flesh. Their disagreement was very public but was echoed in many other places where the church was flourishing, so Constantine called together Christian leaders – 381 Bishops and their staff – and essentially said: Hey: you guys need to figure this out. And that was the primary purpose for the gathering in Nicaea and the Creed that emerged from it – to determine the being and nature of Jesus.

Michael Carpenter is the pastor at Lost Creek United Methodist Church in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and I love how he describes all this in his book "We Believe". He explains: "The controversy before the council of Nicaea between Arius and his Bishop, Alexander, dealt with the "being" or nature of Jesus. In Greek the word for being or nature is *ousia*. It's on the screen. Arius was firm that to preserve the truth that there is only one God, Jesus the son could not have the same *ousia* as the Father. At best, he could have a similar nature but not an identical one. Ever this sloganeer, he attempted to smear Alexander by staking his position out for him. Arius launched the first attack ad in church history claiming that Alexander believed that Jesus was *homoousios* or of one nature and being with God. The

idea was that such a thought would be so scandalous, so beyond the pale, that Alexander would be defamed by being anywhere near the term. But as it has happened more than once throughout church history, the attack ad backfired. Alexander took the bull by the horns and led the charge to insert *homoousios* into the creed.... Alexander's opponents, put on the back foot by his championing of *homoousios*, sought a compromise. What if we say Jesus is of similar nature to the Father, which in Greek, would be the term *homoiousios*." [from "We Believe: How the Nicene Creed Can Deepen Your Faith" by Michael Carpenter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2025) pg. 32, 34.] There's just one little letter in there – an iota (which is the Greek letter i). To which Carpenter very appropriately concludes: there is not one iota of difference in the nature of Father and Son. Which, by the way, is where that expression comes from – *homoousios* verses *homoiousios*. They used every word they could think of – including *Homoousios* – to describe for us that Jesus is God in the flesh – that his essential nature is that of God the Father. He is not a creature created by God. He is begotten of the father outside of time. He is prophetic, but not merely a prophet. He teaches profound truth but is more than a great teacher. He works miracles but is more than a mystic. He is fully human, feeling pain, having lungs and kidneys and a reproductive system, but he's not only a man. He is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being – *homoousios* – with the Father, and through him all things were made because he participates in creation. He is not a product of it like you or me, although he takes on flesh and enters creation at just the right moment in history.

Which is crazy complicated. But I hope that it resonates with our hearts, even if we can't put it into words any better than they did 1700 years ago.

This stuff matters. It matters because it orients our priorities and our choices. It matters because it connects us to the saints who've gone before us and the church yet to be. We follow ONE Lord. It's not any human leader. God in Christ and God the Father share the same essential nature, which is what gives Jesus the power to deliver us in new birth and the power to remake a fallen world into God's Kingdom. The work is ongoing. But the power behind the work is the one Lord! Thanks be to God. Amen.