

Nicene Creed Sermon Series: *Sermon #2: July 7-8, 2018*

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our heart be ever pleasing to you, O Lord,  
our Rock and Redeemer – amen*

For those of you who might not have been here last week, and for those of you who slept through the sermon (and I know who you are...), we began a 5-6 week sermon series on the Nicene Creed. Today will be the second installment of said series. But first, a short review. Last week I made the case that the Church was on solid footing when it teaches and proclaims her faith with the words of the Nicene Creed. To substantiate that claim, we looked at the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and focused primarily on verse 4: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!" We saw that this statement is in fact a creed; that is, a statement of the basic beliefs of a religion. Both the first and second clause of this verse make a claim about who God is. I then took you to two New Testament examples of the Shema being brought into the life of the Church precisely as a Creed, even as it was being expanded to include Jesus. Those examples were from St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:6 and from Jesus himself in Mark 6:28-33. If you missed the sermon, or slept through it, I encourage you to either listen to it on our website, or pick up a hard copy of the sermon from the sermon rack in the narthex.

Today I want us to return to the Shema and look at how it, as a creed, identifies and shapes Israel as a community. And as the Church is the continuing community of God, this has implications for us and the Creed. The claim here is that not only does the Shema claim something; it actually makes or does something. And this is true because of who the human creature is: Having been created in a loving God's image (1 John 4:8, 16: "God is Love), we are created to love. And because we are created to love, we are created to worship, which is an expression of our devotion and allegiance to the object of worship.

Two problems arise here: First, We forget that this is who we are. Since the Enlightenment we in the Western Church have had a tendency to think of humanity as being primarily (and sometimes only) thinking things. Or to paraphrase one of my favorite Christian writers: We think of ourselves as brains on a stick forgetting that we also have bodies and a heart.<sup>1</sup> The Judeo-Christian faiths have long understood the centrality of the heart and its desires as being central to the human person even as it shares influence with the mind – it is not mind *or* heart, it is both and. They have also understood that just as the mind needs to be trained, so too does the heart. We have to be taught what and how to love, and we do this by developing habits that then become second nature to us, or what we call virtues. This implies, however, that we can be trained to love the wrong thing, hence the vices.

Indeed this leads to our second problem, and that is while we forget this about ourselves, the world around us, does not. It is constantly and perpetually attempting to redirect our love away from what we were designed to love – namely, The Triune God who created us in his image. Think of the commercials we are all inundated with. Most of them aren't designed to convince your brain of something, they are designed to convince your heart by eliciting desire. They do so by giving us false pictures of the good life, or by playing into our inner insecurities as well as various other means. The brand loyalty retailers and sports franchises attempt to instill in us, is nothing if it is not an attempt to train our hearts to love their product. They want our devotion and allegiance. And to be clear, in this fallen world, there are an almost infinite number of loves attempting to compete with our true love. As fallen creatures we are prone to put the creature, especially ourselves, in the place of the Creator.

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<sup>1</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016).

I suspect that most of us, when we struggle in our walks with the Lord, we struggle with competing loves. That has been the case in my life. Its not that I have had fits of doubting the truths of the faith, it's that I loved other things. In fact, this is why scripture uses the analogy of adultery when speaking of idolatry – its primarily an issue of love, even if our intellects our involved. Now please don't misunderstand me, I am not saying that our intellects do not matter. That would be a silly thing to say in the course of a sermon series on the Nicene Creed. However, I am saying that our hearts and minds are intertwined - they influence one another. What we believe affects our loves, and what we love affects our beliefs. As such, we must train both our hearts and minds, and this goes double for our children and grandchildren!

I think we see this in the Shema, so at long last, turn with me there: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, p. 191 in your pew bibles. Let's start with verse 4: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" Recall that last week I told you that in the original Hebrew, this verse does not say "the Lord," it actually has God's proper or legal name; the name that God gave Moses at the Burning Bush: "I Am Who I Am," which we pronounce as YHWH. Recall also that I told you that so holy was this name, and being so fearful of taking it in vain, the Jews adopted the practice of substituting the Hebrew or Greek word for Lord in its place; a practice the Church has followed, hence the use of "the Lord" here in this translation. This means, though, that when God's legal name was used, people took notice, it struck the ear with force. And for the Jewish hearer, it would have immediately drawn their mind to the Burning Bush and God's work to save them through the ministry of Moses. So this statement that "I Am Who I Am is our God," or "YHWH is our God," isn't just making a statement about our God, it is making a statement about what he has done, and just as importantly, it is making a statement about who we are. If he is our God, then we are his people; we are his people that he saved from slavery in Egypt by the blood of the

Pascal Lamb. In this creedal statement, not only do we learn who our God is – he is YHWH and he is One – we also learn who we are; we are identified as the people whom he has made by the mighty acts of his outstretched hands. And as we will see later, the Nicene Creed does the same for us.

From here Moses moves straight to the application in verse 5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." In other words, because of who God is and what he has done for you, you are to love him with all that you are. Your whole life, indeed your very being, is to be dedicated to him as an act of worship. This sort of love for God crowds out all other loves, including love of self, family, country, hockey team, work, school, and whatever else competes with our love for God. This doesn't mean that we don't love these other things too (indeed, the second great command is to *love* our neighbor), but it means that they are to be subordinate to our love for God, they are to be shaped by our love for God, and if they get in the way of our love for God – if they become idols – they may need to be abandoned for the sake of our first love. Obviously that is hard to literally do with love of self and family (and let me be clear, you should not abandon your family under the false pretense that God told you to, he did not, he will not!), but even our love for ourselves and our families are meant to be in the context of our love for God.

A point that Moses makes in verses 6-9:

<sup>6</sup>These words that I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. <sup>7</sup>You shall teach them diligently to your sons [and daughters] and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. <sup>8</sup>You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead.

<sup>9</sup>You shall write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.

Before we turn to the text here, three reminders. First, recall that our hearts must be trained what and how to love. So in verse 4 Moses addresses our *minds*, telling us who God is and who we are

in him, and in verse 5, he address our *hearts* telling us to love this God, YHWH – the one flowing directly from the other. Second, recall that I said our hearts are trained by habits. As we repeat something (an action, or thought, etc.) over and over, it becomes ingrained in us. Or as the popular phrase goes, it becomes second nature to us. So as we, by an act of intellect, determine to pattern our lives a certain way, we develop a habit that trains our heart to desire. Think of the person that takes up exercise and eating healthy. At first it is a real struggle, they must force themselves to stick with the diet and go to the gym. After awhile, though, they begin to desire healthy food and exercise, even to the point that they feel an emptiness if they don't get to the gym. And so it is in verses 6-9; we are to train our hearts to know and love the Lord per verses 4-5. Third, recall that last week I told you that, in the Hebrew, Moses was switching between the plural form of "you" and the singular form of "you". For example in Texas they say "y'all" for the plural you when there is more than one subject and "you" for a single subject. In this way, when Moses says, "You shall teach them to your sons," he is using the singular "you," meaning that you, Thebeau, teach *your* sons, and you [fill in the blank] teach your sons/daughters and/or grandkids.

Why does this distinction matter? It matters because even as Moses is addressing the corporate body of Israel, he is commanding the individual families to teach and train their children to love the Lord their God – to form habits of the heart in them. It is not enough to just initiate them into the corporate body through circumcision, or in our case infant baptism, this is only a start; they and we must be trained to live into that community reality – a reality that is centered on a relationship of love with the Lord. But notice, this relationship is fostered through liturgy – that is, a work of the people, a pattern of worship and life – and liturgy forms habits. Moses tells Israel and her families that they must teach their children through all the motions and

movements of the day: "when you are sitting at home, when you walk by the way, when lie down, and when you rise up." In other words, our whole day is meant to not only be shaped by our love and devotion to God, but we are also to be about the business of raising up the next generation into a loving relationship with the Lord their God. All day, everyday. 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Everything else is of secondary importance to this command, and indeed, nothing else has the eternal significance this does. If we want our kids and grandkids to know the Lord and to not abandon the Church when they get older, then parents and grandparents, Moses tells us that it is on us to train them to love the Lord.

This raises the question how? Well, teaching them the Creed is one way to do that. In fact, it is the Shema, as a creed, that is the content that is being taught throughout the day. Moses tells the families to teach all that he is commanding them in verse 6 right after verses 4 and 5. It is these two verses that are the content of the teaching. Of course, the teaching is more than just memorizing the verses 4 and 5; it will also include unpacking and explaining all of who God is and what he has done for us. It will also include explaining the moral implications of who God is and what he has done for us, including to love only this God. The other way to train them is to shape our lives and theirs around love for the Lord. This is the force of talking to them through all the motions of the day and of writing the commands on our doorposts and strapping them to ourselves. It trains us and them to make the Lord the priority of our lives; or perhaps better, it makes him the primary love of our lives. And for those of you without kids, you are implicated in this also. All of us need this training, number one. Just as we are to train our kids through the motions of the day, we must train ourselves. Let us not miss that if we are responsible to train our kids throughout the day, we will necessarily be going through the liturgy with them, and thus we will be trained ourselves. And number two, while Moses is addressing individual families

specifically, he is addressing them in the context of corporate Israel, and us such, we all share the responsibility. It takes a Church to raise up a believer; hence the baptismal liturgy asking the congregation if they will do all they can to support the newly baptized and their parents/sponsors.

It should come as no surprise that both of these training methods are native to the Anglican tradition. As the continental reformers started by writing theological arguments, our reformers started by writing the Prayer Book, which included prayer services that marked the motions of the day, what we call the Daily Offices: Morning Prayer, Noon Day Prayer, Evening Prayer (said around dinner time), and Compline (said at bedtime). The idea is that in ordering our lives around the daily offices, we train our hearts to love the Lord by making him the priority of each day. The liturgy that Moses gives to Israel is about developing relationship with the Lord, so it is with ours. As Anglicans we believe liturgy isn't only about ritual and ordered worship, it is primarily about training our hearts to love the Lord our God. And the Creed is a central part of that, just as it was for Moses and Israel.

So in closing, I want to suggest three ways that the Creed, primarily in the context of the liturgy, but also in general, trains us to love who we were created to love, namely, the Triune God. One, the Creed teaches us the content of the faith and in so doing, it teaches who our God is and what he has done for us, which means it also teaches us who we are. In other words, the Creed functions in the same way as Deuteronomy 6:4. As part of this function, and I am going to leave this hanging a bit because I will get into next week, the Creed teaches us how to read Scripture. We learn to see the subject matter of Scripture by being taught the Creed, even as the Creed is drawn from Scripture. To put it another way, there is a co-inherence between the Creed and Scripture. For now what I want to say is that by reading Scripture in light of the Creed, we learn to see Jesus face to face, and this can only have the affect of drawing us deeper into him.

Two, by reciting the Creed together in the context of either the daily office or corporate Sunday worship, the Creed shapes us into a community with a shared memory of a shared history. It reminds us that God's saving actions toward us happened in time and space under Pontius Pilot and through the prophets, etc. And that by virtue of our baptism, we share the same history with those saints alive then. The Creed also reminds us that our faith was handed down to us through the ages. We didn't codify this Creed. It was done by saints alive roughly 1600 years ago in the case of the Nicene Creed, long before that in the case of its predecessors. As such, it teaches us that the Christian life and faith are always dependent on other saints; we cannot walk this walk alone, we must do it in the context of community.

Three, the Creed functions as the Church's pledge of allegiance. Recall that in our Baptismal Rite we renounce our allegiance to the kingdom of darkness and turn to the Lord and swear our allegiance to him and his kingdom. In this sense our baptism is a political act, we are swearing our allegiance to the kingdom of God and the King of kings. Notice too, that we renew our baptismal vows by standing and reciting the Creed together; we are once again, as a corporate body, the city of God, standing to swear our allegiance to the King of kings, Jesus. Do you know why we do this facing the altar? We do so because it is the symbolic presence of the throne of Christ Jesus. As the Kenyan liturgy puts it: "the lamb who was slain, has begun his reign." The altar reminds us of this truth.

These acts of worship, along with the recitation of the Creed teach our hearts whom to love by committing us to his Lordship. Does this mean that we foreswear our obligations as citizens wherever the Lord has planted us (which in our case is the U.S.)? No, it does not. We are called to work for the welfare of the city where God has placed us, to love our neighbors.<sup>2</sup> In fact, from our perspective, as ambassadors of Christ, we should be the best civilians in any

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<sup>2</sup> See, Jeremiah 29:7.



society as Christ has given us the Holy Spirit to empower us and the Scriptures and the Church to guide us. As Anglicans we don't have the same hang-ups about the relationship between church and state as some of our brothers and sisters in Christ, but we must always remember that our first and ultimate allegiance is to the Kingdom of God and its King, Jesus Christ. This means that we the Church must be prepared to stand as prophets and say no to the state when she acts contrary to the Lord's standards. As the Creed proclaims, it is only his kingdom that will have no end – all others will pass away. He is the King that will judge all kings, and at his name "every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

*And so with that, saints, let us stand together and pledge our allegiance to the King of Kings, Jesus Christ, with the words of the Nicene Creed, which you can find on p. 45 of your red prayer books.*