

## We Are What We Believe

### The Apostle's Creed, Part 5

*"[I believe] in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."*

This is the fifth and final proclamation in our series on *The Apostle's Creed*. The Creed ends with "[I believe] in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."

First, forgiveness. We tend to believe that only the most grievous sinners, the ones who fall flat on their faces, need forgiveness, and that we, who occasionally stub our toes, don't need forgiveness, at least certainly not like those big time sinners. Time and again Jesus said that everyone needs forgiveness all the time. It was, in his view, a daily requirement of average people, just like us, who honestly don't have strong urgings toward wrongdoing.

For example, in all three of the Synoptic Gospels we read the story of the paralytic who was brought to Jesus and because of the throng of people around the Lord, was lowered down to him through a hole in the thatched roof. The first thing Jesus said to him was, "Your sins are forgiven you." We don't know if the man had really committed any huge sin. But the Jews would have believed that either the paralytic or someone in his family had sinned in a big way to put him in that horrid and debilitating condition. Jesus, in forgiving the man his sins, was taking care of any perceived great sins as well as the so-called little sins of which everyone is guilty. Jesus was also placing preeminent focus on forgiveness of sins before health of mind and body.

The Lord also tells us that we should not just seek forgiveness from God, but also from each other. We are not whole beings when there is separation between ourselves and God because of our sin. We are also not whole when there is separation between ourselves and other persons. This works two ways. If you need forgiveness from someone, you need to seek it. Likewise, if someone seeks your forgiveness, you need to give it. And if you are separated from another because of your sin, you cannot seek God's forgiveness for it until you first seek forgiveness from that person. Then you may go to God.

We need forgiveness every day. I believe that is why Jesus placed the phrase "and forgive us our trespasses" immediately after "Give us this day our daily bread" in *The Lord's Prayer*. There is a daily-ness about the act of forgiveness, just as there is a daily-ness about receiving physical nourishment.

A four-year old put forgiveness into clear focus. He prayed one night at bed time as he had heard people pray in church. "And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets."

The most destructive force in the world is anger. Except, perhaps, for the mentally challenged, anger does not happen by itself. Something causes anger. That is why we say that anger is always a secondary emotion. While some anger can actually be healthy, pointed at social justice issues, for example, it must still be resolved. Most anger, however, is not healthy, it is destructive. When a person who is angry focuses only on the anger and not the root cause of it, they begin their own inward demise. Anger usually begets anger. If I get angry with you and I yell at you and demean you, chances are you are going to be hurt, and then probably get angry yourself. The downward spiral is set in motion.

The most constructive force in the world is genuine forgiveness. God-inspired forgiveness that flows from the heart is healing and restorative. If someone has sinned against you and you truly forgive them from your heart, then it is you who have been set free. That forgiveness must be expressed directly to your offender, or else it is moot. When you do, you also open the door for something good to work in that person's life as well.

The next statement in the Creed is a profession of belief in the resurrection of the body. We find it hard to let go of our earthly body. For better or worse, our bodies significantly define us. They help shape our personalities. They are part of who we are. We see them every day in the mirror. And

although we say we believe in life after death, coming to grips with the loss of our earthly life and our bodies is not easy.

The early Christians had the same problem. They asked the apostle Paul, “How are the dead to be raised?” and “With what kind of body do they come?” Paul responded in 1 Corinthians 15:36-37, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.”

That’s the key. What we shall be when we die is somehow contained in who we are while we are alive. But it is more than that. Just as the apple tree comes only from an apple seed, so we shall come from the mind-bodies we are now. But the apple tree is much more than the seed from which it grew. So, too, we shall be far more in eternity than anyone could tell by looking at us now.

Receiving a heavenly body is not automatic. God gives it. This is where the Christian teaching about immortality differs from other religions. Immortality is a Greek concept. It means life goes on automatically in some form or another. But Christianity teaches resurrection, which means someone has to do the raising, and that someone is God. It is God who takes the dead seed and makes it bloom into a heavenly plant. Without God’s loving grace, it would never happen. The emphasis on eternal life is thereby kept where it needs to be, on God and his power.

God gives us an eternal form beyond this life. And what a form it will be! Paul, again in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 says, “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.”

The adjectives here are important. The body that dies is perishable, dishonored, and weak. We know that. We abuse our bodies. We also decay naturally with time. But our bodies are only the seeds. The body that is raised up, the spiritual body is different. It is imperishable, honored, and glorious. The heavenly power Paul speaks about is the power to be connected with the Source of all being for all time.

The last statement in *The Apostle’s Creed* is the profession in the life everlasting. It follows naturally from the profession of belief in the resurrection of the body. Robert Bolt wrote a play entitled *A Man for All Seasons* that details the life and death of Sir Thomas More, who refused to acknowledge King Henry VIII as supreme head of the Church of England during his reign in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. More was beheaded for his unequivocal and vocal stance on the issue. Having been led to the executioner’s platform, More turned to the hooded man with the ax and said, “Friend, be not afraid of your office. You send me to God.”

Don’t you wish all of us could feel that confident of life after death? It would make dying much easier. Why don’t we feel more certain? Because ours is a different age. We live after Darwin and Freud and Einstein. We live after the Holocaust and we live in the nuclear era. We live after Nine-Eleven. Our age is one of science and technology. Television manipulates our reality. Most of us are not very certain about a great many things.

Polls consistently show that 94 percent of Americans believe in life after death. They believe in it as an idea. But having great personal comfort in it is another matter. To be honest, most of us are truly scared of death. We are afraid because we no longer live daily life openly anticipating death. In fact, we go out of our way to avoid the topic. In Sir Thomas More’s time, people openly thought and talked about what it would be like on the other side. In our time, we place our value and emphasis on this life. We party hearty, take drugs and drive fast cars, grabbing all the gusto we can, trying to crowd as much living into the few years we have, and we don’t feel at all confident about what it will be like to die and move on. We focus so intently on this life that we lose touch with the next one. That is why the church and our religion are so important.

Here is a key point: what we believe about everlasting life greatly affects the way we live and how we feel about everything else now. If you were in worship four weeks ago when I began this series on *The Apostle’s Creed*, I said that what we believe is crucially important because it determines our

attitudes. In turn, our attitudes determine our feelings, and it is our feelings that determine our behavior. And our behavior, of course, is the most observable thing about us.

If we pay attention to our input about the subject of life after death, counteracting the general tendency in today's society to neglect it, then our belief in it will be strengthened. When that happens, then our attitudes and feelings about life will be changed in positive ways. The result will be the kind of behavior advocated by Jesus, in which we will care more for the Kingdom of God than for the perishable things of this age, and we will care more for the welfare of other people than for our own well-being.

Paul, again in 1 Corinthians 15:58 said, "Therefore, my dear brothers [and sisters], stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Paul knew that there is a direct correlation between believing in the life to come, and being steadfast, immovable, and abounding. When we know that this life is a prelude to another and that the other is infinitely more beautiful and glorious than this one, then it has a positive effect on everything we think and do. What really matters is learning to live now with the grace and understanding of the life that awaits us.

The final word in *The Apostle's Creed* is "Amen." Amen does not signify the end but the beginning. It means "and it shall be so." To say Amen is to voice trust and faith in what was said, or prayed, or sung before it. Amen is a vote of utter confidence and submission to God.

"[I believe in the forgiveness of sins, in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen." *The Apostle's Creed* taken in its entirety is a profession of faith of what it is we believe as Christians. And to put it succinctly, we are what we believe. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 10 April 2011