

CREEDAL COMFORT
Sermon, October 3, 2021
World Communion Sunday
Text: Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

Something I've long appreciated about the Presbyterian tradition, and especially so since formally coming into the Presbyterian church in 1990 (*most of you know I was originally ordained Baptist*), is our practice of formally and regularly affirming our faith during worship with the reciting of some of the historic creeds of Christendom. I'm sure there may be the rare exception, but Baptists never do that ... they do not make it part of the worship service to recite the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed or any of the other creeds of Christendom. The oft-repeated slogan in many Baptist churches is "*No creed but the Bible!*" That is, the final authority for faith and practice is not words about the Bible; it is the Bible itself ... which really is commendable, and to be sure, something I do resonate with, but I've also been around long enough to know there is hardly any unanimity or knowledge about exactly what the Bible says ... hence the wisdom of collectively seeking the interpretive voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through the collective voice of the Body of Christ, the church, and hammering that all out over the centuries in the creeds and confessions of that church.

Yes, the Bible IS the final authority, not the creeds; I get that ... but as we stand in worship and recite these time-tested creeds of the church, creeds that are subordinate to scriptural authority, creeds such as the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed, we are doing something that is really so very counter-cultural. It is counter-cultural because it is something that runs counter to our relativistic, whatever-you-believe-is-OK culture of this day and age. We are asserting and affirming our beliefs do not originate with us; our beliefs are not based on what **we** think or how we "feel." It is counter cultural because we stand and assert allegiance and commonality with a long tradition of faith; we don't stand up in church and recite our personal opinions. We affirm the great historic faith of Christianity, which is larger and stronger than the faith of any one of us. And it should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway ... by doing so we also affirm we will seek to *match our deeds with our creeds* ... which is also counter cultural, because we live in a day when too many people *change their creeds to match their deeds*, allowing their morality to dictate their theology ... rather than the other way around.

It's my usual job to preach on Sundays; it's the calling of my life, and I'm aware that as I preach Sunday after Sunday, I preach weekly (*that's with two e's ... and also with "ea" on more Sundays than I care to admit*) and as I preach weekly, I'm aware I preach to a congregation which has people in it whose lives are often marked by quiet desperation, people who are dealing with all kinds of circumstances ... illnesses, family issues, fears, concerns ... which, by the way, is the painful reality for any one of us at some time or another. So many who gather here each Sunday are just barely holding it together; I've said this before, but you would be amazed if you knew the difficulties faced by the people sitting near you in the pew. I like how one pastor put it: "*The task of the preacher is not so much tell of new things, not to inform people of what they don't know, so much as it is to remind people of what they mustn't forget.*"

The creeds help remind us of what we mustn't forget, they speak of the great faith that was preached by the apostles; the great faith that has been paid for in the blood of martyrs, who died for confessing that Jesus is Lord and living their lives accordingly; their deeds matched their creeds. This is the great faith hammered out by the great ecumenical councils, crystallized by the world's greatest philosophers and theologians, set to music by the world's greatest composers, depicted in canvas and stone by the world's greatest artists. Each and every time we take our stand to affirm our faith, we take our place in this great historic community of faith, a community that extends world-wide and a community that extends back thousands of years, and we remember who we are and Whose we are, why we are here and what we are to do and where we are heading. We are echoing the words of apostles, saints, martyrs, scholars, kings, queens, prophets, faithful servants and communities of faith down through history who have already faced everything we could possibly face in our lives and have come through with a substantial faith that is more than intact! There is comfort to be found in rehearsing all that; there is comfort to be found in having identity, purpose, and direction in common with such an august community of faith.

This morning I'd like to briefly address just one line from the Apostles Creed, a line some, at first, may not find comforting: "*From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*" (*Almost every time I think of this particular line, I remember a young confirmation student named Lisa from 30+ years ago ... In reply to the final exam question, "From where did Jesus*

come to judge the quick and the dead?" she wrote her tentative answer, "Thence?" I gave her partial credit.) The point of this line of the creed is that everyone is going to be judged when Jesus comes from "thence." Everyone. The creed asserts we won't be able to hide from this in the grave and we won't be able to hide from this out of the grave. And whether we believe it or not won't affect the reality that Jesus really is going to come back, one day *everyone* is going to bow and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord! As we sing in that grand hymn, *"At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, every tongue confess Him King of Glory now."* Some will do it willingly. Some will do it not so willingly. But *everyone* is going to do it. No one is going to avoid it. This line of the creed basically asserts, *"Jesus is going to come. Jesus is going to judge. Deal with it."*

At first blush that may not seem too comforting. One thing we need to know, though, is our Judge is Someone Who knows us very, very, very well! Now, for some people this may be a disturbing thought, especially if you are not living a life of personal integrity ... you may not want to be judged by someone who knows you too well, someone you can't fool. On the other hand, however, being judged by someone who knows us, who *really* knows us, can in fact be deeply reassuring. We don't need to be afraid of a misunderstanding if our judge is someone who really, really knows us AND loves us. The promise of the Scripture underscored by the Creed is that we will be judged by Someone who knows us and understands us AND loves us even better than we know and understand and love ourselves! He knows our past, He knows our strengths and weaknesses, He knows our advantages and disadvantages ... He even knows our parents and our grandparents and our siblings and all the people who've influenced us for good or for ill throughout the course of our lives (*and usually it's a mix of both ... the same person or persons can influence you in good ways and in bad, because in this fallen world every human being is a complex mix of the good and not-so-good*) (*A friend texted me the following meme a week or so ago: "I sent that Ancestry site some information on my family tree ... they sent me back a pack of seeds, and suggested I just start over."*). Our Judge is One who knows ... He knows what we've had to endure, and what we've not had to endure, since the day we were born.

I, for one, would hate to be judged by anyone else! I'm sure you'd agree with me if you think it through. Who here hasn't been misjudged by people who really didn't know you? Who here hasn't had some action of yours impugned by those who don't know all the facts? (*And we people certainly have a marvelous capacity for making up our own facts!*) Who here hasn't had your motives misunderstood at some time or another? Who here hasn't had your words misinterpreted, misheard, misquoted or otherwise misused? Who here hasn't had your good intentions taken wrongly? Who among your family, friends, peers, neighbors *understands* you perfectly; who knows you through and through, and has never misunderstood your words, never misinterpreted your actions, never misconstrued your intent? If you have someone like that in your life, consider yourself extremely fortunate! Actually, though, everyone here *does* have opportunity to have Someone like that in their lives, if you will embrace Him as Savior and acknowledge Him as Lord. Jesus Christ knows you through and through. He knows the reality. He's never going to learn some "new" information about you that is going to cause Him to change His mind about loving you. This means we can be honest about ourselves with Him, in a way just not possible with other people. That also means, however, we can never pull the wool over His eyes. He knows.

We will be judged by One Who cares deeply for us. Our Judge lived on this earth as one of us and He also knows first hand what we have to go through. We are not dealing with a distant God who knows nothing of what being human means. He's *"been there, done that"* because He's been here! He was made like us in all things. He walked our roads in life. He felt our loneliness, our hunger, our pain. He cried the tears of those who grieve deeply. He knew what it's like to be misjudged. He was ultimately condemned by biased judges, hostile and fickle crowds who misunderstood Him, and an indifferent public prosecutor. He knew all about injustice and betrayal and people not understanding Him. Yes, Jesus was a man of sorrows, well acquainted with our grief. AND, don't forget, He was also well acquainted with our joy. He had friends He dearly loved, people He truly trusted. He delighted in children, dinner parties, and wedding receptions with lots of wine. In Jesus, we have a Savior who knows all about the highs and lows of our lives because He lived it all among us. He was human like us in every sense -- and as such, He is the perfect sympathizer. And He is the perfect Judge, the One Who knows us better than we even know ourselves. **This** is the Judge who will come from "thence." As we commemorate at this Table, this same Judge is the One Who gave His body and blood that we may be forgiven.

Yes, *"He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."* It isn't our peers who will be our judges. Thank God for that! And it isn't our co-workers, or our neighbors, or our spouses, or our children, or our in-laws ... who will be our judges. Thank God for that! It is Jesus Who will judge. The Judge who knows us, and the Judge Who is also the Savior Who gave Himself for us and stands ready to forgive.