

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 19, 2025
9:30 AM

Texts: Colossians 1:15-20 & John 10:22-39

Theme: We Believe: "Of One Being with the Father"

[prayer]

There once was a priest named Arius who lived in Alexandria, Egypt. Arius was a devoted follower of Jesus who took seriously the basic tenets of Christianity, particularly our commitment to the existence of one God. Because of this commitment, he found himself in a theological quandary: If Christians believe in only one God, how then are we supposed to relate to Jesus? How do we reconcile our belief that Jesus is divine with our belief in God the Father? Doesn't that leave us with *two* gods instead of one?

This question cuts to the heart of what it means for Christians to worship the Trinity – One God in Three Persons. John Wesley taught that the Trinity is a mystery better experienced than explained. But Arius was deeply troubled by this theological puzzle. The math was just not adding up. And so, he devised what he felt was an elegant solution: Jesus is divine, but not in the same way as God the Father because Jesus is not *eternal* like God the Father. Arius claimed there was a time *before* Jesus existed. "There was when he was not." Arius taught that Jesus was created by God. As the Son of God, he was the progeny of the Father, meaning he existed *after* the Father and inherited his divinity *from* the Father.

This slogan – "There was when he was not" – began to spread throughout the church in Alexandria, one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. A third of Alexandria's priests were eventually preaching the same message as Arius. This put Arius at odds with his bishop, a man named Alexander. Alexander was concerned that Arius's teaching flew in the face of the doctrine of the Incarnation – the belief that Jesus is not a separate being from God, but rather God in the flesh. That doctrine is laid out by Paul in his Letter to the Philippians:

6 Though [Jesus] was in the form of God,
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
7 But he emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings. (2:6-7)

Paul was quoting one of the earliest hymns in Christianity, a hymn that affirms the miracle – and the mystery – of the Incarnation.

The disagreement between Arius and Alexander was the primary issue that led Emperor Constantine to convene the Council of Nicaea. After weeks of debate, the Council settled on the portion of the Nicene Creed that addresses our beliefs about Jesus Christ. We will spend the next three weeks in this, the longest section of the Creed, which begins

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
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.*

When the New Testament refers to Jesus as Lord (in lower caps), it is alluding to the name of God. This is because LORD (in upper caps) in the Old Testament – *Adonai* in Hebrew – is a substitute for YHWH, the name of God. When Christians call Jesus Lord, we are not just using a title that confers respect; we are implying that Jesus is in fact God. We believe that there is one God and one Lord, Father and Son.

But “son” denotes a parent-child relationship, which is why Arius taught that Jesus was divine by patrilineal descent. And the Nicene Creed does affirm this to a certain extent. It says that Jesus was “begotten” by the Father. “Beget” describes a man having a child (men “beget” their children while women “bear” them). The Council drew this language from Psalm 2: “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: / He said to me, ‘You are my son; / today I have begotten you’” (v. 7 NRSVUE). This

verse is quoted once in Acts and twice in Hebrews to explain Jesus's relationship to God.

But the Nicene Creed also says that Jesus was “not made.” He was not created in the way that human children are. In fact, he was not created at all. He existed eternally with the Father. He was begotten outside of space and time. When God spoke creation into being, the Son was there. Not only was he there, but he was and is, according to John, the eternal Word that was with the Father in the beginning and issued from the Father's mouth to create the world (John 1:1-5) – one with the Father, but also separate, like the words that issue from our mouths.

The Word represents the will of the Father. When the Pharisees demanded to know whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus responded, “The works I do in my Father's name testify about me...I and the Father are one...If I don't do the works of my Father, don't believe me. But if I do them, and you don't believe me, believe the works so that you can know and recognize that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:25, 30, 37-38 CEB). The mercy and justice Jesus demonstrated through his teaching and ministry all embody the will of the Father. To say that Jesus is the Son of God is less a statement about his familial origin than it is a statement about the perfect alignment between Jesus's will and the Father's will. Jesus perfectly reveals who the Father is because Jesus perfectly does the Father's will in all things. “No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made God known” (John 1:18).

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes that “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the one who is first over all creation...Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him, and he reconciled all things to himself through him” (1:15, 20). Paul was once again quoting an early Christian hymn. (The fact that these early hymns were powerful tools for teaching the doctrine of the Church should resonate with us as Methodists; we have always been a people who sing our theology.)

Paul heard that the church in Colossae was full of devoted Christians, but he also heard they were diluting their worship of Jesus Christ by also worshiping astrological powers. And so, Paul says to them: Let me tell you about the right order of things! Jesus is in all and through all. He is the first and the last. He was there before creation began and his eternal reign is where creation is headed.

Those stars in the heavens? They wouldn't even exist if it weren't for Jesus, the literal Word of God, who spoke them into existence. He is the Creator and they are his creatures. You owe him your veneration, not those stars.

And why should you worship Jesus? Paul says: Because Jesus has made the invisible God visible! When you look at Jesus, you are looking at God. He is the physical manifestation of all that is divine – God's love, God's mercy, God's power. As Jesus said to his disciples, "No one has seen the Father except me" (John 6:46). But those who look upon Jesus get a glimpse of the Father. Those who know Jesus know a little something of God, because in Jesus God made Himself a home among human beings.

This was a radical, even dangerous message, for Paul to preach! In the Roman Empire, where Caesar was considered descended from the gods, it was treason to call another human being the Son of God. Some believed that was all Jesus was – just another man who *became* divine. Arius disagreed; he argued that Jesus was always divine, just not in the same way as the Father, as if his divinity is different or lesser than the Father's. He taught his followers that Jesus was *homoiousios* with the Father – of a similar nature, but not identical.

But none of these positions are what Nicene Christianity affirms. The Nicene Creed says that Jesus is *homoousios* with the Father – "homo" meaning same, "ousios" meaning nature or being. Jesus is of one Being with the Father. All the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in him. Not part or some, but all. Not a similar nature, but the same nature.

Rev. Michael Carpenter writes, "When comparing these two terms, one a bold claim of faith and the other a heretical compromise...one letter, one *iota* separates them. But in that slight change is a monumental distinction. Because there is not one iota of difference in the natures of the Father and the Son."¹

After all that, perhaps you are wondering: Why does it matter? Why spend all that time and energy arguing over a single Greek letter?

¹ Michael Carpenter. *We Believe: How the Nicene Creed Can Deepen Your Faith*. Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition. Page 35.

This is why: Because if Jesus is not fully God, then he has not won us our salvation. If Jesus is only partially God, then we are only partially saved, partially redeemed, partially reborn. It takes the power of God to save us from our sin, the full power of God to overcome death and raise us to new life. Paul declares that God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into His kingdom, a kingdom of light and grace (v. 13). The Greek translation of the word ‘transfer’ literally means the spoils of battle. We were once citizens of the kingdom of darkness, pledging allegiance to the powers of sin and death. But Christ is greater than any power of darkness.

Remember what we declare in our baptismal vows – that we renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, repent of our sins, and confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior. And when we confess such, we confess our belief that there is nothing in heaven or earth greater than our God. Nothing exists outside the power and presence of God:

- Not the oppressive power of fear and violence.
- Not the demoralizing power of scarcity and poverty.
- Not the desiccating power of illness and death.

Just as Christ reconciled us to God, so Christ is also reconciling these powers to God. Christ’s sovereignty extends to all of creation. There is no power in our lives greater than the love of God. It may feel at times like the world outside these church doors is disintegrating into chaos. Or maybe it’s not the outside world, but the inside world – your personal life – that’s disintegrating.

But Christ is holding all things together. The love of God in Jesus Christ is a love that is holding us together. We do not need to be afraid! Though the earth will change and the mountains shake and the oceans roar and foam, we have the assurance that Jesus is God, and he is with us.

Did you know that on Christmas Eve we sing part of the Nicene Creed? The second verse of “O Come, All Ye Faithful” includes the portion of the Creed we have been reflecting on today. And so, in the spirit of the hymns that inspired the early Christians to affirm the divinity of Christ and the miracle of his Incarnation, I would like us to conclude today’s sermon by singing it together:

*True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal,
lo, he shuns not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father, begotten, not created.
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord!*

Amen.