

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 12, 2025 | 9:30 AM

Texts: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 & 1 Corinthians 8:1-6

Theme: We Believe: We Believe in One God

[prayer]

This year marks the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. In May 325 AD, hundreds of bishops from across the Roman Empire met in what is now Iznik, Turkey. They were called there by Emperor Constantine to write the Church's first official creed.

For the first three hundred years after Jesus died and was resurrected, Christians faced persistent and even violent repression. They were at odds with their pagan neighbors because they insisted on worshiping a single God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ rather than the gods of Rome. The Romans ostracized these early Christians and even subjected them to torture and death.

Despite this repression, the Church grew into a flourishing underground community with thousands of believers spread across the Roman Empire. But because of the early Church's scattered nature, Christian communities developed beliefs in isolation from each other. Some of these beliefs were incompatible with each other. Major theological differences emerged. This was before the Bible was canonized and the Church was divided between Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians.

When Constantine came to power, he developed an affinity for Christianity. He decided to bring the Church out from the underground and establish Christianity as the official religion of the empire (a decision with dubious consequences to this day, but I digress). Constantine recognized that the diverse Christian communities spread across his empire needed a unifying dogma. And so, he summoned all the leaders of the Church to a lakefront town called Nicaea and tasked them with hammering out their theological differences. For weeks they debated major questions about the nature of God and His Son, Jesus Christ. What emerged from

that gathering is the Nicene Creed. It remains to this day the most widely accepted benchmark of orthodox dogma in Christianity.

While no creed is officially part of The United Methodist Church's doctrine, John Wesley affirmed the Nicene Creed as a historic statement of faith and encouraged Methodists to include it in their worship. Perhaps you grew up reciting the Nicene Creed every Sunday and know it by heart. Or perhaps you are familiar with its more concise cousin, the Apostles' Creed, which we usually recite at baptisms or when receiving new members into the church. Or maybe you don't find creeds all that meaningful and are wondering why the fuss over a bunch of words written by a group of bearded men seventeen hundred years ago. Fair question! For the next six weeks we are going to consider why this creed is so important to the Church writ large. We will also consider how the Nicene Creed can deepen and inform our faith as disciples of Jesus Christ in the year of our Lord 2025.

A creed is designed to set boundaries around a belief system. Christians are and always have been free to contextualize our faith according to our culture and social location. This is how we enjoy such diversity of Christian expression. This is also how we find ourselves disagreeing a lot on non-salvation issues. A creed does not create uniformity, but it can create unity around the most important things we all believe. The Nicene Creed is not an individual expression of faith. Notice it does not ever use the phrase "I believe." The Creed is a communal statement, written in community and proclaimed in community. It says "We believe." "We" the local church together. "We" United Methodists together. "We" every Christian together. If someone unfamiliar with our faith looks at the diversity of Christianity, *What do all Christians really believe?* we can point to the Nicene Creed and say, *This. We believe this.*

The Nicene Creed begins thus:

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.*

This declaration is what most distinguished Christians, and the Jews before them, from their pagan neighbors. Belief in a single god ruling all of creation, rather than

multiple gods with different spheres of influence, was unusual in the ancient Near East. But Israel insisted on worshiping one God and one God alone. After the giving of the Ten Commandments, Moses issued the following instruction:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD [YHWH] is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deut 6:4-5 NRSVUE)

These are the opening words of the *Shema*, the Greatest Commandment, the capstone to the Law enshrined in the Ten Commandments. The opening words of the Nicene Creed intentionally allude to the *Shema* in order to connect Christian our faith to the Jewish faith of Jesus. Moses gave the *Shema* as Israel prepared to cross the Jordan and take possession of the Promised Land. It is telling that he was not concerned with how to conquer and inhabit the land. Instead, he was concerned that once Israel settled in, she would forget the Law and begin adopting other belief systems. The Greatest Commandment was intended to nurture Israel’s spiritual commitment, so that the Law might be figuratively (and even literally) written on every palm, fixed on every forehead (teffilin), and nailed to the doorpost of every house (mezuzah). Moses wanted faith in YHWH and YHWH alone to be in the very bones of the people, reaffirmed with every new generation, so that the nation of Israel would never stray from the Law.

The real innovation here, however, is not monotheism. It is the mechanism Moses chose for nurturing Israel’s spiritual commitment. The *Shema* emphasizes faithfulness, obedience, worship, service, even reverent fear of God. But above all it emphasizes *love*. The Greatest Commandment commands the Israelites to *love* YHWH with all their heart, soul, and strength. Even more than fear or duty, love has the power to bind the hearts and souls of people in loyalty. People will sacrifice for love. People will suffer for love. People will die for love.

Notice that the Nicene Creed begins by calling God both Father and Almighty. “Almighty” implies power and authority. This is how most people have and continue to relate to the idea of a god – cosmic, transcendent, all-powerful, transactional, something to serve and appease out of fear. But “Father” is the opposite. It is intimate, relational, parental – a wise, guiding, nurturing, loving presence in our lives. Theologians call this pervasive, sustaining presence the “immanence” of God.

Immanence implies personal knowledge. God personally knows each one of us. The creator of heaven and earth is also *our* Maker. Each of us is a tiny but nonetheless cherished piece of God's Creation. Paul emphasized as much when he got up and preached in Athens about the Athenians' altar to an "unknown god." He declared, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:23-28).

The Father's knowledge of us is the foundation of our knowledge of and love for Him. We can know who God is because God first knew us. Methodists call this prevenient grace. We come to know God by loving God. And "anyone who loves God is known by him," Paul says in our Scripture reading (1 Cor 8:3). To fully know and be known by God, Paul argues, is the apex of Christian maturity: "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12).

The *Shema* teaches that moral obedience to God's commands is closely related to a loving relationship with God. We show God our love by obeying His commandments. And as we observed in our study of the Ten Commandments, God's Law is an expression of love. It teaches us, motivates us, inspires us to love God and love our neighbors; in fact, to love God *by* loving our neighbor

Worshipping a single god may feel like no big deal to us. But in the early Church, insisting upon one God to the exclusion of all others marked a firm boundary for Christians. It was a countercultural move, a distinction that set them apart from Roman culture. This love and worship of a single God was expressed by rejecting and refusing to worship the Roman pantheon. But it was also expressed by the way Christians demonstrated love for their neighbors. The early Church's practice of sharing belongings in common, fellowshiping with women and slaves, caring for the widow, the orphan, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the social outcast – this behavior, this faith praxis was also deeply countercultural.

For example, in our Scripture reading from First Corinthians, Paul is considering whether Christians ought to eat meat that has been offered to idols. He acknowledges this is not forbidden because true believers know that “No idol in the world really exists” and “There is no God but one” (1 Cor 8:4). He concludes that Christians are free then to eat the meat. But this freedom should be tempered by a Christian’s love for their neighbor. Christians should not eat meat offered to idols in front of recent converts who may easily stumble and revert to pagan worship. “Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never again eat meat,” Paul says, “so that I may not cause one of them to fall” (1 Cor 8:13). Paul is arguing that we demonstrate our love and commitment to the One God by putting our weaker neighbors’ needs before our own. The Romans were bothered that Christians refused to worship their gods, but they were even more bothered by the Christian practice of neighbor love that disturbed the Roman social order. But the early Church grew precisely because of their radical demonstration of neighbor love. Loving our neighbor is the most effective and powerful evangelism tool Christians have.

Thousands of years after Moses issued the Greatest Commandment, Jesus restated it thus:

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like [equivalent to] it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt 22:37-40)

When we think or speak of the One God, we are speaking of relationships: Our relationship with God, God’s relationship with us, and our relationships with each other. God is a perfect community of creative love. This is what we affirm when we say that we believe in One God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. We are affirming this sacred relationship that connects the transcendent divine with the immanence of human relationships. We are affirming that loving relationship is at the core of our beliefs as Christians, our very center of gravity.

Rev. Michael Carpenter writes, “Seventeen hundred years on from the council [of Nicaea], the religious landscape is much changed. Instead of competing for space in a crowded marketplace of different gods, demigods, and Caesars turned-god,

Nicene Christianity now contends with a lack of faith in any god. While many people still report a connection or yearning for the spiritual, there is less interest in the personal God proclaimed in the creed. Compared to even a century ago, there is less knowledge about God among our neighbors. And yet, people...are still in search of the truth that the Nicene Creed proclaims.”¹

I am not sure if Christians, especially those of us who seek to follow Jesus in the United States, are headed for a new era of repression. We still possess privilege and safety unimaginable to Christians who lived through the repression of the early Church. But we certainly do not enjoy the same cultural power today that we did even a few decades ago. I do not think that is a bad thing. When we dominated the religious and cultural landscape, we could rest on the assumption that people knew and understood what we believe, and our witness grew lax and even fractured. Now we must build up our evangelism muscles. We do this by returning to the roots of what we believe, like the Nicene Creed, and then harnessing that belief to inform and strengthen our love for our neighbor. If like the early Church we can focus on loving God and loving our neighbors in radical, countercultural ways, then nonbelievers will take notice. And they undoubtedly some will say, *Tell me more about what these Christians believe.*

Amen.

¹ Michael Carpenter. *We Believe: How the Nicene Creed Can Deepen Your Faith* (p. 19). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.