

SERMON TITLE: "I Believe in Jesus Christ" (*The Apostles' Creed* Series)
SERMON TEXT: Philippians 2:1-11 (also used Jesus' baptism and Heb 1:1-5 in the service)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 13, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

When I was in high school in the late 70s, one evening my boyfriend and I went to see the first *Rocky* movie. That was the fictional movie in which upstart Rocky Balboa won a boxing match against the world heavyweight champion Apollo Creed. I probably won't ever forget that movie because my date got so excited and engaged in the action of the movie that he accidentally punched my glasses and knocked out one of the lenses. In the 40-some years since that memorable movie, the *Rocky* franchise has produced a total of six movies with the *Rocky* name, many of them including the aging character Apollo Creed. Then, in 2015, the *Rocky* franchise produced a movie under the name *Creed*. This *Creed* wasn't Apollo the father, however, but Adonis Johnson Creed the son. This illegitimate son, who seemed to come out of nowhere, had all the instincts and natural talents of his father and wanted very much to prove his "legitimate" relationship. In the most recent *Creed II* movie which has been in theaters this winter, Adonis the son continues to show the strength and vitality of his father's tradition and legacy.

I'm telling you this story of Apollos and Adonis Creed because their name and story goes well with this sermon series on *The Apostles' Creed*. The word *creed* means *belief*, and we began last Sunday with "I Believe in God." Reflecting on an experience of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts, we talked about our Christian belief in only one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and affirmed that believing that our one God exists is still a viable option and significant help to us in the 21st century.

Today we move on to the second big phrase of *The Apostles' Creed*, from the Father to the Son. Using Paul's New Testament letter to the Philippians, let's think about what it means to say: "I believe in Jesus Christ."

1—I BELIEVE IN JESUS' DIVINITY

The Christian understanding of who Jesus is can be pretty complex, and we'll get into some of that. But the first, and most essential, reason why Christ is important to us is that we believe in Jesus' divinity. *The Apostles' Creed* expresses this in the shorthand that Jesus Christ is God's "only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit." The idea is that Jesus originated with God and was uniquely created by the holiness of God's Spirit. This isn't a statement of biology or a DNA paternity test. This is a theological affirmation that declares, as Paul did in Philippians 2:6, that Jesus "was in the form of God" and had "equality with God."

As I told you last week, the carefully crafted language of *The Apostles' Creed* took many centuries to develop. Like the United Methodist General Conference that's coming up at the end of February, there were several different ways these very big decisions could have gone. The perceptions of the relationship between God and Jesus weren't fully clear while Jesus walked around Galilee with his disciples, and these concepts weren't even pinned down definitively at the time the New Testament gospels were written at the end of the first century. But the early Christians who encountered Jesus and passed along their faith to others absolutely believed that there was something about Jesus that connected with and communicated God to others in a unique way. And those persons of faith did their best to express this belief and persuade others using the languages and cultural contexts of their time.

At the Council of Nicea in the year 325, the faithful leaders of Christianity got together and debated the question of whether or not Jesus was *similar to* God or exactly the *same substance as* God. The two Greek words were *homoiousios* and *homoousios*—two long words that differ only by the letter "i" in one of them. The decision was made at that council that Jesus the Son did not differ from God the Father even by one iota, not even by one little i. Over the centuries, there have been continued debates, but that decision in 325 settled the issue for the most part. Since then, when Christians affirm, "I believe in Jesus Christ," we generally mean to say, "I believe in Jesus' divinity."

2—I BELIEVE IN JESUS' HUMANITY

Of course, the reason why this is so tricky is that Jesus wasn't just divine. When we Christians pronounce, "I believe in Jesus Christ," we also intend to say, "I believe in Jesus' humanity." *The Apostles' Creed* signals this when it says that Jesus was "born of the Virgin [but human mother] Mary." Along those same lines, Philippians 2:7 indicates that Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

Just as there was great debate about whether or not Jesus was of similar or the same substance as God, there were also many debates about whether or not Jesus was similar to or exactly the same as the rest of us flesh-and-bone mortals. On the "similar to" side were some Christians who said that it was unthinkable to them that God could experience the pain and suffering of humans and especially the trauma and humiliation of the cross. But, as Christian leaders worked it out, it was the fully-human opinion that won the day. The Jesus we've come to know and love wasn't fudging or faking or pretending or skipping in or skipping out of the human experience. It was the same mundane and mortal human experience for Jesus as for any other human being—including the terrible twos, adolescence, and death.

We Apostles' Creed Christians believe that because Jesus was one of us and tempted like us, he understands us thoroughly and offers plenty of mercy for our weaknesses. And because he was the best and most faithful human among us, he also has the power to inspire and lead us to follow him to a higher plane of humanity. In his human life on earth, Jesus was an excellent example and teacher. He cared about people and offered them healing from illness and freedom from sin. He pointed out injustices in the laws and worked to alleviate harm against the poor and the oppressed. Jesus touched people with kindness and love, spoke truth to power, and taught that these actions were possible for all of us humans to do. This is the full humanity of Jesus and what it means to believe in Jesus Christ.

3—I BELIEVE IN JESUS' LORDSHIP

We Apostles' Creed Christians don't stop with the two facts that Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully human, however. We also believe in Jesus' Lordship. In the creed, we say, "I believe . . . in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord." And, in Philippians 2:11, Paul says that "every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." These words sound familiar to us because we often sing the chorus, "He is Lord; He is Lord. He is risen from the dead, and He is Lord. Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord." Those song lyrics come straight out of these verses in Philippians 2.

The point is that, to be Christian people, we can't just have an intellectual idea of who Jesus Christ is. We can't just say, "Yeah, sure. I believe that Jesus was fully God and fully human at the same time," and then simply go on with our life as if that makes no difference. To believe that God came to us in human flesh means that our allegiance, loyalty, absolute attention, and priority are going to be with this one who inspires and motivates our faith. If Jesus chose to humble and empty himself of power and privilege and take on the form of a slave, then that means that we too should be willing to give our obedience and devotion like a humble slave to our master, to our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter seven, Jesus warned that it's easy for someone to say the words, "Lord, Lord." What's more important than saying, "Lord, Lord," said Jesus, is doing the will of God and bearing good fruit. As our children are learning in Sunday School, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Doing the will of God would also certainly include obedience to the two greatest commandments—loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. These acts of submission to the teachings of Jesus are the ways that our knees bend and our tongues "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." These are the ways we are able to communicate, "I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ."

CONCLUSION

As I was preparing for this sermon, I recalled a funny scene in which the identity of Jesus comes up in the 2006 movie *Talladega Nights*. In that movie, actor Will Farrell portrays NASCAR racer Ricky Bobby. In this one scene, he's at the dinner table with his wife, his two sons, his father-in-law, and his best friend Cal. Before they dig into their ensemble of fast food, Ricky offers grace.

He begins his prayer, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus," and then proceeds to thank Baby Jesus for the food, his family members, and friend one by one. As he prays this lengthy prayer, he continues to repeat the phrase, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus."

At one point, his wife Carley interrupts him and says, "You know, Sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him 'Baby.'"

Ricky Bobby replies, "I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I'm saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grown-up Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want."

Ricky Bobby continues his prayer, "Dear tiny Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers, with your tiny little fat balled-up fists."

His father-in-law interrupts with irritation, "He was a man! He had a beard!"

Ricky Bobby snaps back, "Look, I like the baby version best, do you hear me?"

Ricky Bobby's best friend Cal then chimes in, "I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo T-shirt. It says, like, 'I want to be formal, but I'm here to party too.'"

One of Ricky Bobby's sons says, "I like to picture Jesus as a Ninja, fighting off evil samurai."

Cal then adds, "I like to think of Jesus with giant eagle wings and singing lead vocals for Lynyrd Skynyrd with, like, an angel band."

Ricky Bobby returns to his prayer, saying, "Dear eight-pound, six-ounce, newborn infant Jesus, who doesn't even know a word yet—just a little infant, so cuddly but still omnipotent." He then thanks

Baby Jesus for all his NASCAR victories and the millions in prize dollars he has won. He finally concludes his dinner prayer by saying, "Thank you for all your power and grace, dear Baby God. Amen."

As a trained theologian, I have to say that there's a lot going on during that prayer that should make us wince. But Ricky Bobby and his family did have it right that Jesus was both the omnipotent, powerful, and graceful God *and* the human being who was tiny and teenage and adult-with-a-beard. And maybe more important than if we get every detail of our theology right is whether or not we allow the divinity of God to come through Jesus to us to touch our own humanity and make a significant and saving difference in our lives and the lives of those around us. Do we, will we, allow the divine and human Jesus to be our master, savior, and Lord? For this is what it means to say, "I believe in Jesus Christ."