

May 15, 2022 - Easter 5

Litany of Resurrection

P - God has come into our void,
C - Filling our hearts with love.
P - God has embraced our pain,
C - Filling our hearts with hope.
P - God has even entered our death,
C - Filling our hearts with life.
P - Christ is risen!
C - Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Prayer of the Day

O Lord God, you teach us that without love, our actions gain nothing. Pour into our hearts your most excellent gift of love, that, made alive by your Spirit, we may know goodness and peace, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Word - Revelation 21:1-6a

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

Sermon

On page 105 in the front of our worship book, you will find the text of the Apostles' Creed, which begins with the words, "I believe." On page 104, you will find the text of the Nicene Creed, which begins with the words, "We believe."

These are statements of faith which the church has used to proclaim our faith for most of the church's life. They are *confessional statements*, which articulate what we believe, which remind us of our story, which express the truth we hold so dear.

The Apostles' Creed starts with "*I* believe," because it came out of the very early church's practice of baptism. The baptismal candidate would be asked to make a confession of faith, and each would use these, or similar words, so it has come down to us as a statement of individual faith, even when we say it together.

The Nicene Creed comes from a couple centuries later, when the church as a whole was facing some pretty significant challenges. The church leaders wanted to testify to the Christian faith on behalf of the whole church, so they used the plural, "*We* believe."

But regardless of whether they are worded in individual or corporate terms, they are both confessional statements; they are both confessions of faith.

And these are not the only ones. The Bible is quite literally full of them! The reading from Revelation (printed above) is full of them! The way the writer has worded the description of this vision is loaded with confessional statements.

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

I am making all things new.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

These are all affirmations of Christian faith. They are all expression of what we believe, what we hope, and what gives meaning to our lives as followers of Jesus.

Confessional statements are part and parcel of our tradition. They are central for us; they are critical to how we express, and how we live, our faith.

Here's the challenging thing about confessional statements: Even though we live our lives by them, they are not verifiable. We cannot devise a scientific experiment which will demonstrate that Jesus is Lord. "Jesus is Lord" is a confessional statement which cannot be proven; it can only be lived.

"Death will be no more," and "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end," are confessional statements. They, too, cannot be proven. They, too, can only be lived, can be used to set priorities, to guide us through the complexities of life.

Confessional statements cannot be forced on others. We are incapable of "making" someone else believe our proclamations of trust in Jesus. Our statements of faith cannot be imposed. They *can* be shared. They can be shared in all kinds of ways! A cup of tea with a hurting neighbour, a phone call to someone who is lonely, a food voucher to someone who is hungry, a signature on a petition to raise an issue which needs addressing...; there are any number of actions in which will proclaim our faith. These confessional statements cannot be imposed. They can only be shared.

Confessional statements can't be legislated. In the same way that you and I, as individuals, can't make someone else believe what we believe, neither can the church, or the government, or any other organization, make rules that others have to believe the way we do. Can you imagine what the reaction would be if the Canadian Parliament passed a law which said that only people who were baptized as adults could vote in the next election? I'm going to guess that such a law wouldn't go over very well! And rightly so! That's why we talk about conscience. Such things cannot be legislated. They can only be done willingly.

Confessional statements are not provable; but they *are* livable.

Confessional statements can't be imposed; but they *can* be shared.

Confessional statements can't be, or at least shouldn't be, legislated; but they *can* be lived out willingly.

Ultimately, confessional statements are about *us*. They describe *our* faith, *our* story, *our* priorities. They are not about getting "The Other" to be like us. Rather they help us live out our faith *for* "The Other."

The reason I think this is important for us to wrestle with right now, is because of the news stories which are coming from south of the border. The headlines are all screaming about Roe vs. Wade, about the ramifications of drastically changing the laws in the United States concerning abortion.

I know this is hard, but bear with me.

If you listen to any of the so-called "discussions" about abortion these days, they almost always turn into shouting matches. And if you listen long enough, the two combatants (there really is no other word) will end up repeating one argument against the other side, again and again.

One side will say, "But what about the baby?" And the other will respond with, "But what about the woman?" "What about the baby?" "What about the woman?" "What about the baby?" "What about the woman?"

They go back and forth, and back and forth, and yell louder and louder, and nobody's minds are changed, and heels are dug in even further, and there seems to be no way to move forward, or even to change the discussion into something other than a shouting match.

“What about the baby?” “What about the woman?” Again and again.

It's exhausting.

So, given all this, how do we respond?

I've been wracking my brain over the last couple weeks, trying to discern how we can make a real contribution to the dilemma, instead of simply adding to the noise, or running away and hiding?

Here's my current “take” on the issue. I think that *both* of these questions, both of these perspectives, both of these arguments, are *actually* confessional statements. They are both telling anyone who will listen about the *speakers*, and about *their* priorities, about *their* beliefs, about *their* stories.

In spite of the assumptions made by both sides, there is no way to prove that one side is right and the other side is wrong. In spite of the attempts made by everyone involved, there is no way to force everyone to arrive at the same perspective (if only we shout a little louder!). In spite of the desire to pass laws one way or the other, there is no way that everyone will come to agree that it's the right law.

Insisting that “As soon as the zygote is implanted in the uterine wall, it is a full human being,” is as much a confessional statement as the Apostles' Creed. And *as* a confessional statement, I have no issue with it. It's telling me about the speaker's perspective and beliefs, so at that level, it's fine.

But when people try to take that confessional statement and turn it into a *legal* statement, they have crossed the line. Taking that confessional statement and insisting that everyone must believe it the way they do, is inappropriate to say the least. Declaring that they have the God-given right to pass laws which rely exclusively on such confessional statements, is not only misguided, it is actually dangerous, because that leads directly to a theocracy in which we pretend that God is this country's Prime Minister.

And here's the thing. The gospels make it totally clear that Jesus didn't *want* to be Prime Minister! *Or* President. Or King, or Emperor, or Senator, or even a local judge.

Which means that taking our confessional statements and making them law, is actually trying to replace Jesus, and put ourselves at the top of the heap, with everyone else under us.

Including Jesus.

But the confessional statements which we read in the Bible, this week and every week, won't let us play that game. The confessions of faith which we recite each Sunday proclaim to us that we have other fish to fry. We are reminded, over and over again, that Christian faith is not about control; it's not about power; it's not about dictating the response of others to the truth we hold so dear.

Christian faith is about *our* following Jesus. The confessional statements our faith has inspired are about admitting *our* struggles, are about *serving* the struggling people around us, are about proclaiming our belief that love really *does* have the last word, even in a world as messed up as this one.

Confessional statements are important. They are central to who we are. They provide guidance, they furnish us a life-giving perspective about ourselves and the world, and they give meaning to our lives.

They are not provable, but they are livable.

They are not impose-able, but they are sharable.

They can't (or at least *shouldn't*) be legislated, but they can be acted out willingly.

Ultimately, they are not about getting “The Other” to confess them for *us*; they are about *us* confessing them, and living them, *for* “The Other.”

And we know this in our bones, because, during this holy season, we make our most important, most life-giving, most central confession, which reminds us of the whole purpose we have been given by God. Which is, of course, that Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

Prayers of the People

Celebrating the new life we have received, we offer our prayers for our world, our neighbours, and ourselves.

[Short pause]

A - Alpha and Omega, you are our beginning and our end; you are the destination of our journey, and you are the way we arrive *at* our destination. Give us the desire to follow you. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Alpha and Omega, you are our expectation and our joy. Give us the faith to celebrate your promise, and share all that is in us. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Alpha and Omega, you are making all things new. Give us increased awareness of what you are doing around us, and give us the willingness to take part. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Alpha and Omega, we confess, with the whole church, that you are our God. Free us from wanting to impose our way on the world; but at the same time, set us free to *live* our way *for* the world. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Alpha and Omega, you are our health and our hope. Remind us that we go nowhere without your promise, and that nothing can separate us from your care. We lay before you those people and situations which lie heavy on our hearts and minds.

[Long pause]

Reassure us that death and mourning, crying and pain will be no more. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Alpha and Omega, in prayer and in worship, at work and at home, in life and in death, we confess our resurrection faith. Give us the courage to live our confession. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - We offer these prayers, and the prayers we carry in our hearts, trusting in your abundant and ever-present mercy; through Jesus Christ our living Lord.

C - Amen.