

Last Monday, on the last day of a 3-week vacation, I learned a new term: ‘umbraphile’. We were driving to the airport in Nashville from North Carolina, where we’d just left our daughter at Brevard College. (And let me pause to say: leaving a daughter near the opposite coast for college is not what I thought I was signing up for 19 years ago!) Our drive was just under 5 hours and we got an early start because multiple road signs had warned us that the eclipse would make for heavier than usual traffic. Both Brevard, NC, and Nashville, TN, were in the so-called ‘path of totality.’ As we listened to the radio and heard lots of stories related to the eclipse, Jen mentioned this term: ‘umbraphile.’ An umbraphile is someone who loves eclipses and will travel to see them wherever and whenever they occur.

When I’d made our flight plans, I had no idea that Nashville was in the ‘path of totality.’ In fact, I didn’t even realize that our return flight would coincide with the eclipse. I was just looking for the cheapest fare! So clearly, I am not an umbraphile. Still, Riah and I joined about 7 other people at one curb of the Nashville airport when the eclipse was about to start. Two of these people were gracious enough to share their special glasses as the eclipse progressed. After 50 minutes, as the moment of ‘totality’ drew near, more and more people – both travelers and airport personnel – gathered outside of the terminal. About 10 minutes before totality, I was stunned at the huge swath of people packing the walkways around the drop off and parking areas for the airport.

And then... the moment of totality; when it was safe to take off the glasses and view the total eclipse with our naked eyes. The sight was more stunning than I’d imagined, but the sounds I heard also stirred my spirit deeply: there was a collective gasp of all of those people, then spontaneous applause, and then a feeling of comradeship that we were a gathered ‘congregation’ witnessing something unique and spectacular.

Since I’m not an umbraphile, I was unprepared for the emotions that welled up. As I shared that moment with our youngest son, I was moved with profound gratitude for 2 glorious minutes, as the distance between heaven and earth seemed to become so incredibly thin. I won’t be chasing any eclipses, but I will be eternally grateful for those 2 sacred minutes on the curb of the Nashville airport.

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Today, we begin a 6-week series on the Apostles Creed. The Apostles’ Creed, which outlines the essentials of Christian faith, was formulated about

400 years after Jesus’ resurrection. This Creed is itself based upon an earlier creed known as the Old Roman Symbol, which dates back to the 2nd or early 3rd century. But the earliest, most succinct, creed of our Christian faith was shared by the Apostle Paul in Romans 10:9, “If you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord’ and in believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

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Besides the Apostles Creed, you may notice that our hymnal contains several other creeds. But the UMC is not a creedal church, because no one creed or confession defines our denomination. Just a few years ago, there was an effort to get the denomination to adopt that the Nicene Creed as our basic affirmation, but the proposal was rejected by clergy and lay people elected to consider this option.

Now, I don’t think the proposal was rejected because UM’s don’t believe in creeds. We include them in the hymnal because we do! But from our beginning John Wesley, our founder, was focused on what’s called ‘practical divinity’ or ‘lived divinity.’ In one sermon Wesley said this: “religion [does not] consist in orthodoxy or right opinions;... A man may be orthodox in every point; he may not only espouse right opinions, but zealously defend them against all opposers; he may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, [] the blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine contained in oracles of God” and still not be authentically religious. Wesley defined true religion as living according to Jesus’ double commandment that we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

Some have perceived – wrongly -- that this means UM’s don’t believe much of anything. But I’d offer this famous adage of John Wesley: “As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.”

The Apostles Creed, together with other early creeds of Christianity are what Wesley refers to as the ‘root’ -- or the essentials -- of Christianity. So, throughout this series we’ll take note of what is, and what is not, included in the creed, because it seems people expend lots of energy (and vitriol) arguing over opinions and matters that do not strike at the root of Christianity. Wesley earnestly cautioned the earliest Methodists to avoid unproductive, theological hairsplitting, because such arguments do not aid us in our effort grow in love of God and neighbor.

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So let's begin with the opening line: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth." While there's lots to say about this first affirmation, let's hone in on three things. The first is the assertion that this God we believe in is, "Father Almighty." We could get hung up here if we think of this as an assertion primarily about God's gender. I'm certainly amenable to other terms when speaking about God because scripture deploys lots of terms and metaphors when speaking about God, including feminine terms. But I'd prefer we focus on how, from this very first line, the creed uses a deeply relational term – a parental term – for God.

The creed could just as well have started: "I believe in God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth." But such an all-powerful force, would've been impersonal. So in asserting God is *Father Almighty*, the creed does two things: first, it connects with what is both explicit and implicit in scripture: that human beings are God's children. While both science and scripture testify that human beings are small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, the creed conveys that as God's children, we matter to God – even as children who go far away from home to attend college matter to a loving parent. Secondly, this conveys that God's almighty power is not capricious or oppressive, rather it's exercised as a wise parent exercises power. As many of you know, when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray he invites them (us) to refer to God using the Aramaic word 'abba.' Abba doesn't just mean "Father." Though it's a respectful term, 'abba' is also an intimate term. That is why it's so important to note that God's relationality explicitly included from the creed's first line...

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The second thing I'd lift up is the next phrase, that we believe God is creator of heaven and earth. The 'total eclipse' moment I described brings to mind the words of the psalmist, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you set firmly in place – what are human beings that you are mindful of them?"

Adam Hamilton, a UM pastor, writes, "As a Christian, I see God's glory and creativity throughout creation. An atheist, looking at the same things, sees the glory and creativity of nature. At some point we choose either to believe or reject that there is one whose power and mind have brought forth the cosmos." The Apostle Paul was among those who believed that the universe points to the existence of

God. In Romans 1:20 he writes: "Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities – God's eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made."

In affirming that God is creator, we are saying is that creation, that we, are not here because of some extraordinarily lucky accident. Science will always posit an as yet unknown *x* factor behind all of this, but we affirming that the *x* factor is God, and that we are intended. But note that the creed is silent about HOW the universe came into being; how God did it. The belief that God created the heavens and earth is essential; believing a certain explanation of how God did it, is not! If it had been an essential for faith, it would be in the early creeds, but it's not in any of them!

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The third thing I want to lift up is that if we believe God is a good father, and if we believe that God is the maker of heaven and earth, this ought to inform how we treat the heavens and the earth in a way that shows we honor our heavenly parent for how this gift provides for the sustaining and enjoyment of our lives.

The idea that caring for creation has little to do, or is beyond the interest of those who profess Christian faith, is neither scriptural nor historically orthodox. We are forcefully reminded that God did not simply create and then abandon the world by the opening line of Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it, the world and all those who live in it."

Both the first line of the creed, and passages like this one remind us that God's created order is designed well, and for the well-being of all creatures. The special role given to humans at the beginning of creation is to tend and keep creation, not to wreak havoc on God's creation for egotistical, self-serving ends. This is part of what redemption means, but that moves us towards the next line of the creed, which we'll explore next Sunday.

In the meantime, reduce, recycle, and reuse as an offering of praise to God who when surveying creation, called it good, and who is working, even now, to restore creation with the help of faithful servants designed in the image and likeness of our Father Almighty. Amen.