

THE NICENE CREED

What We Believe

3. We Believe in the Holy Spirit

Acts 2:1-4; I Thessalonians 1:2-6;

John 14:15-17; 25-26

PENTECOST 11

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In a college literature class, we were assigned to read Samuel Beckett's tragic comedy, **Waiting for Godot**, voted the "most significant English language play of the 20th Century."

This two-act play features two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, passing time in a disconnected conversation while waiting for a character named Godot to appear.

The stage set is supposed to be bleak and sparse: a tree, a log for sitting, and a path along which someone might walk.

The tramps seem to have nowhere to go.

They suspect that life must hold something better for them, but they have no clue as to what it might be.

So, they wait for Godot to come and break the monotony and senselessness of their lives.

They are further vexed about another problem.

If this Godot DOES come, will they recognize him?

They are disturbed by the absence of Godot, yet, they are equally distressed about his anticipated presence.

This play, written in 1953, held a handful of possible interpretations philosophically, psycho-socially, politically, and theologically.

Remember, this was the era immediately following World War II — the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the challenge of a post-war economy, and anxiety toward the future.

Christians saw the play as a parable about our lives and the absence of God.

We are tramps baffled about the absence of God and disturbed that, if God DOES come, will we miss it?

Whether God shows up or not troubles us to the depths, and threatens us with anxiety and confusion.

Both God's presence and absence present difficulties in the deepest parts of our beings.

We Christians believe that God created the heavens and the earth, that Jesus came from heaven to redeem a fallen creation, and would come again to unite heaven and earth.

We hold these beliefs in our creeds.

Like the tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, we wait for God in Jesus to come again.

But what do we do with the Holy Spirit, Christ's ongoing spiritual presence in the Church?

Do most of us miss it when it comes?

The third article of all of our ecumenical creeds, Apostles,' Nicene, and Athanasian, holds forth belief in the Holy Spirit.

For us Christians, the Holy Spirit is the link between the risen and ascended Christ and the Church.

It is the means by which we experience the transforming power of the resurrected Jesus into His likeness.

With the understanding of the Holy Spirit, not only as a power, but also a person, we are able to finally appreciate the richness of the inner life of the Trinity that has been revealed to the Church, and into which the baptized are initiated.

Using a familiar liturgical phrase, "*it is meet and right*" the Nicene Creed should take up the nature and work of the Holy Spirit before turning to its' statements on the Church.

For unless what it says about the Holy Spirit is true, then the Church is simply another social justice organization among others, rather than the sacred and sacramental presence of God in the world.

Depending, indeed, in how seriously the Church has taken the person and role of the Holy Spirit, I think it has functioned, in the eyes of some in the mainline churches, more as a goddess or feminized power than a living, guiding, discerning divine presence.

The Nicene Creed provides us with four attributes of the Holy Spirit:

“the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.”

Let us look briefly at each feature or mark of the Holy Spirit, as set forth in the Nicene Creed.

By beginning this section in precisely the same way as the previous articles which speak of the Father and the Son, the framers of the Creed already signal that the Holy Spirit is to be regarded in the same manner.

In fact, we can make the claim that the first three statements, or attributes, seek to secure for the Holy Spirit an equality of status within the Trinity.

Such clarification is necessary, because the language in the New Testament about the Holy Spirit itself is rather ambiguous and often nebulous and mysterious at times.

Nowhere do we find a comprehensive and precise teaching of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospels allude to a near future coming and presence of the Holy Spirit, who will guide, counsel, console and transform the apostles and the Church.

Paul, through his letters, seems more explicit in how he sees the nature and purpose of the Holy Spirit.

We read examples from today’s readings.

From John’s Gospel, we overhear Jesus promising His disciples, just before His arrest and crucifixion, to send them another Helper to continue His ministry with them — a Spirit of truth, who ***“will dwell with them and be in them.”***

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus, while appearing to His disciples following His resurrection, tells them that he is sending upon them what the Father has promised.

He commanded them to ***“stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”*** (24:49).

This promise, of course, is fulfilled in the Book of Acts, when, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon them (2:1-4).

The apostle Paul is more explicit upon the Holy Spirit in his writings.

In his various letters to churches, Paul speaks of being led by the Spirit, the Spirit bearing witness, coming to assistance, praying, showing love, giving gifts, deciding, providing a word of wisdom, speaking, and sharing fellowship.

Peter, a recipient of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, names the Holy Spirit as the agent who brought us the good news (1Peter 1:12).

And in the Book of Revelation, the Holy Spirit repeatedly is “speaking to the churches.”

The titles, ***“Lord”*** and ***“Giver of Life”*** ascribed to the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed, serve to encompass both the Spirit’s identity and work, as described in the New Testament.

In the earliest writings, the title, ***“Lord,”*** points to the intimate connection between the Spirit and the Lord God, who created all things, and the Lord Jesus, who sits at the Father’s right hand.

To say the Spirit is ***“Lord”*** is to say that the Spirit is God.

The equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and Son is nowhere more impressively displayed than in the final commission given by the resurrected Jesus to His followers in Matthew 28:19, which reads:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .”

In the same way, the title, ***“Giver of Life,”*** is to say the Holy Spirit is God, as it is God only who can give life.

Paul tells the Corinthians that those who died ***“in Christ”*** will be given life (I Cor. 15:22-36).

To the Romans, he calls God ***“the God who gives life to the dead”*** (4:17).

Again in Corinthians, Paul declares that ***“the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”*** (II Cor. 3:6).

The short statement ***“who proceeds from the Father and the Son”*** has generated more controversy than any other part of the Creed.

In 1054, with the schism between Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy, the split between the Western and Eastern Churches became final, because the Orthodox held to the Holy Spirit as ***“the One who is coming out of the Father.”***

The Roman Catholic position held that the Son and the Spirit are not made by God, but are ***“out of”*** God, and therefore, themselves divine.

The point that the Nicene Creed really wished to make through the language of procession is made more emphatically and powerfully through the language of worship — ***“with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.”***

To recognize the Holy Spirit through worship is to acknowledge that the work of the Holy Spirit is through Christ and the Church.

The final statement made about the Holy Spirit is really the basis of the others.

It is the way God revealed Himself to the world — through speaking — speaking creation into existence, speaking to Adam, Noah, and the patriarchs, speaking through Moses, the Torah, and the prophets.

God speaks to disclose His word, will and self.

The prophets speak of God from God’s perspective.

They are able to discern, in the ordinary events, the social and political life around them, the meaning it all has to God.

What is remarkable about the phrase, ***“who has spoken through the prophets”*** is that it implies that we humans are capable of hearing and seeing at a more deeper level.

It is through the Holy Spirit that this occurs.

The Creed, itself, is the utmost instrument of prophecy.

Beloved people of God,
let's return to where we started with Beckett's two tramps with a double problem.

They were disturbed by the absence of Godot, but they were more anxious that they might not recognize him if he did show up.

Does God show Himself to us?

The Gospel message and teaching is, of course, YES, in God's splendor and glory in the person of Jesus Christ and through His ongoing presence through the Holy Spirit.

We, the members and present-day disciples —the Church — are tasked with paying attention.

Unfortunately, most Christians today have never given their Christian faith and their spiritual health the benefit of their mature attention.

For the most part, they quit thinking of God when they gave up coloring pictures in Sunday School, or memorizing Bible passages in Confirmation Class.

That is why we worship, study, and serve, to exercise our attentiveness to this God, who appears and manifests His presence through the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, and through Word and Sacrament.

AMEN