

Reflection on the Nicene Creed: “Maker of heaven and earth”
By the Rt. Rev. Robert Fitzpatrick, Bishop Diocesan

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

Sunday in and Sunday out in this Diocese, these words are the first we recite together immediately following the sermon at the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Christians around the world will do the same thing. We are making an audacious claim about life and creation. Without this first statement, all else is meaningless. We begin by asserting that this world that we can see or touch is not all there is to existence and that we – human beings – are not the center of it all. The mystery of everything and of nothing are all beyond us – beyond me!

In my youth, I first dared to speak of God as Schleiermacher’s “feeling of absolute dependence”¹ or Tillich’s focus of “being of ultimately concern.”² Yes, my search for God began as an intellectual undertaking in the undergraduate classroom. Through the years the language of those heady German theologians lost for a time its luster and then with age has returned with a critical delight. Why? How do you explain the unexplainable? So, I appreciate (and I am suspicious) of the reality of “feeling” as the pre-cognitive awareness of an immediate existence-relationship -- God. It is the joy in great wonder of existence. Tillich taught me that we human beings can be too concerned for false gods and illusions of our own making. When Tillich suggests that “[t]he being of God is being-itself,”³ he is pushing to Creator beyond our limited reality.

My own struggle with theology and this first clause of the Creed is that it still makes human beings – make me – somehow the center of it all. It is my “feeling” and my “concern” – or at least that of humanity. I seem to want to want to find my “being” in the “ground of Being.”

This is still humancentric, and “heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen” encompasses so much more.” Is God truly the center or is it all about me? Yes, it is my experience and my words (or even that of all humanity), but where is God behind it all?

I increasingly recite these words from the Nicene Creed with the “Canticle of the Creatures” of St. Francis of Assisi (1225) in mind:

*Most high, almighty, good Lord God,
to you belong all praise, glory, honor, and blessing!
Praised be you, O my Lord and God, with all your creatures,
and especially our Brother Sun,
who brings us the day and who brings us the light.
He is fair and shines with a very great splendor:
O Lord, he signifies you to us!
Praised be you, O my Lord, for our Brother Wind,
and for air and cloud, calms and all weather by whom you uphold life in all
creatures. Praise the Lord for our Sister Water,
who is very useful to us and humble and precious and clean.
Praise the Lord for our Brother Fire,
through whom you give us light in the darkness.
He is bright and pleasant and very mighty and strong.
Praise the Lord for our Mother Earth,
who sustains us and keeps us,
and brings forth the grass and all of the fruits and flowers of many colors.
Praised be you, O my Lord,
for all who show forgiveness and pardon one another for your sake,
and who endure weakness and tribulation.
Blessed are they who peaceably endure, for you, Most High,
shall give them a crown.
Praise to you, O my Lord, for our Sister Death
and the death of the body from whom no one may escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin,
but blessed are they who are found walking by your most holy will,
For the second death shall have no power to do them any harm.
Praise to you, O my Lord, and all blessing.
We give you thanks and serve you with great humility.⁴*

“Francis of Assisi was at home in the cosmos. We know this because at the end of his life he composed the Canticle of the Creatures in which he sang of brotherhood and sisterhood in the

family of creation: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Sister Mother Earth. The cosmos became home to Francis because this is where he discovered love, the overflowing goodness of God.”⁵

I think this places God at the very center of creation. God’s love is the force of creation itself. We – human beings – are not the center. We are part of creation. We are not separate. We are not in charge. God’s love drives us to mutuality with creation. God is the creator and, therefore, in creation all is bound together in God. “If separation is not ideal but connection is; if hierarchy is not ideal but mutuality is; then the kinship model more closely approximates reality. It sees human beings and the earth with all its creatures intrinsically related companions in a community of life.”⁶ The first words of the Creed become an affirmation of our dependence upon God and our interdependence within the web of creation. These first words of the Creed echo the great affirmation at the telling of creation in Genesis: “God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good.”⁷ With the opening words of the Creed, we are affirming the goodness of creation and the love of the Creator.

Questions

1. When you pray, how do you imagine God the Creator?
2. What is the relationship of human beings to the Creator? To Creation?
3. Why is Creation good?
4. What does being dependent on God and interdependent in Creation mean to our daily lives?

¹ Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Christian Faith (Two-Volume Set): A New Translation and Critical Edition* (Kindle Location 6435). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

² Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*: 001 (p. 211). University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*: 001 (p. 235). University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Sweeney, Jon. *Francis of Assisi – in His Own Words: The Essential Writings* . Paraclete Press. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Delio, Ilia. *Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth* . Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Johnson, Elizabeth. *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993. 30.

⁷ Genesis 1:31, *Common English Bible*. CEB Common English Bible with Apocrypha - ePub Edition (Kindle Location 241). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.