

How We Believe: A sermon about the [Nicene Creed](#)<sup>1</sup> for us today

It seems to me that most Christians have a favorite heresy. Maybe you think that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament. Or that the Trinity exists like three states of water. Perhaps you believe that Jesus' baptism somehow enhanced his divinity. The Nicene Creed claims otherwise. In beautiful, poetic language, the fourth-century creed gives the ancient arguments for the distinct and equal persons of the Trinity and Jesus as our divine savior. But so what? Why does this matter?

Roy Milton died last week. He was raised Lutheran and remained a member of that church, although he questioned dogma and doctrine, like the creeds, as limiting the mystery of God's infinite incomprehensibility. Roy felt there was great danger in trying to say too much about God, and he observed throughout history how violence was often justified by religious people, which, for Christians, was in direct contradiction to the plain-sense meaning of what the Founder taught.

In his life, Roy sent me at least 228 emails, one of which he prefaced with a smiley face emoji and the phrase “Just when you thought your day was *easy*.” He linked Mark 12:30–31: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.*

This holy love is not “easy,” for it is more than private belief. It goes beyond mere intellectual pursuits or acts of piety. Such love requires more than any recitation of belief in church. While the Nicene Creed is complex and makes lofty statements about the Trinity, this creed also begins with the simple phrase, “We believe.” Remember the Apostles Creed began, “I believe.” I think this slight difference matters.

Tropical Depression Chantal caused the Haw River to rise 30 feet, and I was privileged to help relief efforts last week in Saxapahaw. Don't misunderstand: others worked harder than me. There were fallen trees that needed to be cut and moved, waterlogged carpet that had to be pulled up and hauled off, and mud everywhere—so much mud that volunteers had it coming out of their ears! And they labored in near triple-digit temperatures.

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<sup>1</sup> Following this link will introduce the historical background and theological controversies of the Nicene Creed, which we discussed in detail in Sunday School.

As a pastor, I admit that I'm accustomed to certain speaking roles, but the situation in Sax was not a time for mere words. That's how I found myself scrubbing the inside of an oven. "Wash me clean of my iniquity," prayed the psalmist, "and cleanse me from my sin." But the Good Lord leaves other cleaning projects to us.

In September, we will welcome Jill Duffield, a pastor and author, and she wrote in her new book, "Our individual efforts matter, but our corporate ones increase the salt, light, and leaven exponentially. We need one another's support and encouragement in order to stand firm in the faith, despite all the forces threatening to overtake us." I know there are forces, both natural and human, that overwhelm and destroy. And only love can rebuild and heal. Sometimes love has kitchen grime beneath its fingernails and mud in its ears.

Thinking about love, I find myself less interested in questions of belief about *why* and more about *how*—as in, how specifically can we love? How can we live in a world of beauty and terror? How can we live in proximity to catastrophic loss and normal life all at once? How do I take in images of ravaged children's cabins in Texas or bombed-out schools in Gaza, then turn to give attention to my daughter cupping a tiny frog in her hands or stop to smell the blooming magnolia at the street corner?

I open my heart and mind as I open both my hands. In one hand, I carry the knowledge of heartache and loss. In the other, I hold my joy and gratitude. I clasp my hands in prayer. I bow my head and weep when I don't have the words, for as Jesus wept at the side of Lazarus, so I believe God weeps with us at death.

And then, I open up and feel for beauty and tenderness, for I think the gap between our speaking about and doing justice is that we do not attend as fully to what delights and amazes as to what outrages and dismays. At times, Christians seem hellbent on fighting. If Jesus is to be taken at his word, love is the best creed.

In yet another email to me, Roy Milton quoted James Baldwin: "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and *more loving*." Though written at a time of theological dispute in the early church, the Nicene Creed is ultimately a love poem and not an argument. In love, God sent his only begotten Son, God from God, Light from Light, into the flood of pain not to watch from a distance, but to be swept into it himself. Great is the mystery of our faith, and for that reason, we hold fast to the promise that suffering isn't the end of the story. A day is coming when death will be no more, and every tear will be wiped from every eye. The Nicene Creed calls this "the life of the world to come."

In the meantime and in-between time, in this world and this life, there the extraordinary lodged in the ordinary, a quick catch of the infinite in the always-arriving present.

After the Haw River rose 30 feet and flooded Saxapahaw, a local farm donated 147 pounds of zucchini. Others donated a cooler full of beef. A woman gave a brand-new generator, and a man, who had taken a redeye flight to help his mother-in-law in her flooded apartment, picked up the generator in a borrowed truck and said with a tearful smile, "This means more than I can say."

We are given the chance to love: in the grime beneath our fingernails, in the mud coming out of our ears, and in the smile on someone's weary yet hopeful face, such love means more than anyone could say, yet we believe it when it happens.

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