

**From the Pulpit of
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SARASOTA FL**

What's In a Comma?

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Luke 4:16-21
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Sometimes an idea for a sermon bounces around in my head for a long time. I had the thought for this sermon in mind for a long time, but for about a year and a half I was retired and didn't have an opportunity to preach. Now I have the opportunity, and I'm not bound to the revised common lectionary, so I can develop the idea further.

Despite the sermon title, this is not going to be sermon about grammar. But it is a sermon about how punctuation can influence, even significantly influence, our theology. I start, however, not from the Scripture text, but from something I have seen – maybe you have seen it – in a catalogue for funny T-shirts that we get because our oldest son, a math tutor, wears T-shirts with funny math statements. The first line says, “Let's eat Grandma.” The next line says, “Let's eat (comma) Grandma.” The third line says, “Punctuation saves lives.”

We don't often think about punctuation when we are reading Scripture, or reciting statements of faith, but that punctuation, and those commas, are important. For instance, when people – especially young people who like to read fast – are reading the passage from Luke 2, about the shepherds coming to Bethlehem, I make sure they understand that the comma in one sentence is really important. Commas, in choral music, are breath marks. No comma, carry the note through. But a comma says, “pause here.” So, without the comma, the sentence reads, “the shepherds went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in a manger.” That's a lot of people in a small space. With the comma, though, we read, “and found Mary and Joseph – comma – and the child lying in a manger.” See how the comma can indicate a very different mental picture?

There are several other places in Scripture where a comma can make a real difference in our understanding of what is being said. In Luke, in the crucifixion narrative, one of men crucified with Jesus says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus responds by saying, “Truly I tell you – comma – today you will be with me in Paradise.” But in the Apostles' Creed we say that Jesus “was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose from the dead.” Third day. Today you will be with me. But if we move the comma (and in the original Greek there was no punctuation, nor was anything broken down into chapter and verse), we could read Jesus' reply as, “Truly I tell you today – comma – you will be with me in Paradise.” A little comma, but perhaps a big difference in understanding.

In a similar way, we say the Lord's Prayer pretty much every Sunday, at least in our 11 a.m. service, and there is a comma in the prayer that gives me pause just about every week. Most people don't notice it, because we are so used to saying the prayer in a particular way, the way many of us were taught it when we were young. We say, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done – comma – on earth as it is in heaven.” I think it makes more sense, and is more meaningful, to pray, “Thy kingdom come, *thy will be done on earth* – comma – as it is in heaven.” Interestingly, in the very popular musical setting of the Lord's Prayer, by Malotte, it is sung “thy

kingdom come, thy will be done on earth – comma – as it is in heaven.” Thy will be done on earth as thy will is done in heaven. Just that little comma making a difference.

But the comma that I notice the most, and I think has the most dramatic influence on our theology, is a comma that is in the Apostles’ Creed, and it is why I have a bit of an issue with the creed. I don’t disagree with the creed; I affirm the creed – I affirmed it when I was ordained, and at every subsequent installation. It is not a misplaced comma. It is a comma that contains a huge amount of information and history, and the comma can sometimes cause us to overlook much of what Jesus did in his ministry.

In that creed we say that Jesus “was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary – comma – suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.” Born of the Virgin Mary. Suffered under Pontius Pilate. We could say that the creed indicates that Jesus had no life. Or, we can say that his life was compressed into one little comma.

I know this sounds like I may be splitting hairs here. But there are too many people who have said that “Jesus was born in order to die.” And in the Apostles’ Creed we say nothing about what Jesus did in his ministry, what Jesus did in those approximately three years from the time of his baptism by John until the time of his crucifixion by the order of Pilate.

But that three-year ministry shows us why the religious authorities wanted to do away with Jesus, and why Pilate acceded to the desires of the religious leaders to do away with Jesus. Saying that Jesus came to the earth simply to die is rather like saying that, for you and me, our sole purpose in being born is to die. That would seem to make however many years we have on this earth meaningless and trivial, and it would seem to indicate that there is really no purpose in our lives, no call that we are to follow. And, in some ways, there are some people who would think that the purpose of living a Christian life is to do what we can to avoid the things of this life and hope that we can soon escape this life and get into heaven. I don’t see where Jesus said anything like that, but then, for a lot of people, their understanding of Jesus doesn’t have much to do with what the Scriptures say about Jesus.

The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus having compassion for people, including and especially people who are outsiders, who are the lost, the forgotten, the overlooked, the marginalized. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus saying that his ministry is to bring good news to the poor and release to the captive, to give recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus healing people of many different illnesses, of Jesus reaching beyond social barriers in care and compassion, and calling his followers to be people of care and compassion. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus talking about the kingdom of God, and how the kingdom of God is so different from the kingdom of the world. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus pointing out the idols that people have constructed, or how they have tried to re-shape God into the image the people want to have, rather than the God who has revealed God’s self throughout history. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus confronting the wrongs of the culture, confronting the injustices in the culture, confronting the un-grace that was seen in the culture as well as in the religious community. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus saying that one cannot serve two masters, that there can be only one that is worshiped and served. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus saying things and doing things that riled up the religious authorities to a point where they conspired to do away with him. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus telling his followers that they were called to be servants *in* the world, though they were not to be *of* the world. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus sending his followers into the world, and not telling them how to escape the

world. The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus talking about life in the present, not just that life which is to come.

Somehow some people have overlooked many of the things that Jesus said and did, and have changed Jesus into someone who was born only to die so that they might have eternal life. But read the gospels – Matthew 1 through John 21 – and see what Jesus actually did and said. And know that there is a great deal of life and power and truth in that one little comma in the Apostles' Creed.

Born of the Virgin Mary – comma – suffered under Pontius Pilate. A little bitty comma. A whole lot of powerful theology in that comma.