

Jesus reveals the Truth about God

Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by the Rev. Tom Pumphrey, July 17, 2016

Proper 11, Year C, Colossians 1:15-28, Amos 8:1-12, Luke 10:38-42

Colossians 1:15-28 (NRSV): Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him-- provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

This week I returned from some vacation time. I spent several days in the North Georgia mountains and kayaking whitewater rivers in Tennessee and North Carolina. The mountains and lakes and rivers up north are spectacularly beautiful! It fed my soul to see the mist rising in the smoky mountains early in the morning, or to see the layers of the blue in the Blue Ridge off in the distance. The rivers were alive with fresh water, set in deep gorges carved in the mountains. I often find it consoling to see such beauty made by God rather than by human hands. Human hands, as recent news has shown us, can be so destructive. Natural beauty is such a reminder that God's power is greater than ours, and that his power is beautiful!

Among kayaking friends are some who would say that nature is their church. I've heard people in and out of church say they find God in nature, or that they worship God out hiking rather than in church, or perhaps on the golf course. I understand that they feel more peaceful out in nature, and perhaps they have a sense of something greater than themselves. And if your golf game is like mine, then you certainly do learn a little humility. But sometimes I wonder whether it simply stops there. Is finding God only about having comforting feelings? Is all we need to know about God the pleasure of a pretty landscape?

In fact, some people do indeed worship nature. They not only find God while they are in a natural setting, but they worship the rivers and trees and mountains. Some might not realize that they are doing this, but some will tell you quite plainly that this is so. This may have an appeal, especially when the view is breathtaking, *but is it true?*

God created nature, but God is not nature itself. How best are we to know God? Through nature? Through looking at humanity? The hymn “Fairest Lord Jesus” answers the question this way:

Fair are the meadows, fairer still the woodlands,
Robed in the blooming garb of spring;
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer,
Who makes the woeful heart to sing.

Fair is the sunshine, fairer still the moonlight,
and all the twinkling, starry host:
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer,
than all the angels heaven can boast.

In Today’s New Testament reading, Paul writes to the Colossians about Jesus. He writes that “Jesus is the image of the invisible God...in [Jesus] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ...in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...”

When we see Jesus, we see not only a good example of human living, but we see God himself, for Jesus is God himself. If we want to know God truly—if we want to understand ourselves and our world and our relationship with God, then look to Jesus. Don’t look to nature in all its beauty, or to the works of humanity in all our ingenuity—look to Jesus, who truly reveals God.

Understanding the nature of Jesus is a branch of theology called “Christology.” Perhaps this may seem like a flowery abstract concept, but the implications are quite important to our regular lives. Our theology, and also our values, our priorities and our whole lives should not be based on our own ideas or what makes us feel good or what pleases us. Our priorities and values and beliefs should be based on what is true. Our values and beliefs are based not on our guesses about God—or on what is trendy to say about God. Our values are based on what God says about himself—God’s revelation in Holy Scripture, and most especially God’s self revelation in Jesus Christ.

Now, you might say, “well, humanity is made in the image of God, so we can learn about God from looking inward and looking at ourselves.” Yes, Genesis chapter 1 does say that we are made in the image of God. But Genesis chapter 3 shows us breaking that image and turning away from God, and the rest of the Bible deals with that ongoing problem: the image of God in us is broken, and we all need God’s restoration found in Jesus. Look at recent events in Minnesota and Dallas and France. We are broken images—we are not a good source to know the truth about God. However, as Paul writes, “in Jesus, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things...by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Though we may be broken images of God, Jesus is the perfect image of God. So when we want to know how to live, and how to understand ourselves and our world, we turn to Jesus and to the

word of God that Jesus preached from holy scriptures. We all say we want justice, but what is true justice? And who gets to say what true justice is? Do we invent it ourselves? Or do we seek God's voice on the matter?

The prophet Amos captured this in today's Old Testament reading. Amos criticizes merchants who are too distracted by their business to care about the priorities of God. They plan for more and more sales, and when they can, they cheat the scales that weigh the grain and the scales that weigh the money in order to squeeze more profit from the poor. And so, Amos says, "The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. ...they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it."

If we want to know what justice truly is, seek the word of the Lord, brought to us in Jesus who reveals the truth about God.

Likewise, we all say we should love, but what does it truly mean to love? Do we love on the world's terms of love—what is popular or pleasing to us? So often, we approach love as demands on our own terms, rather than terms of sacrifice. Martha was upset with Mary for sitting and listening to Jesus instead of helping with her tasks. Notice that Jesus does not say that Martha is bad or that hospitality is bad. Rather, Jesus rejects the idea that what Mary is doing is wrong. Essentially, Mary is seeking the word of God, listening to Jesus. Like Martha, we are often so distracted by many things. But we do well to put first: listening to Jesus. From Jesus we understand truly how God calls us to love. For Jesus reveals the truth about God.

If we want to know how to live rightly, if we want to know true justice and love, we seek the truth about God in Jesus Christ. So, what does God reveal to us in Jesus? What is God's justice and love?

Jesus shows us many things, but chief among them is that the God of the universe, the God of justice and truth loves us! God loves us enough to reconcile us to him even though we turn away from God; even though we are unjust and unloving. God does not embrace injustice or hostility, no. But God does not reject us. Instead, in relationship with Jesus, he transforms us—frees us from the traps of this world, frees us to live lives that are whole and not broken.

Let me share with you the story of a man I know who learned about the truth of God. He was successful in business and in life. And yet, he knew that something was not right. He sought God and God's help. He eventually realized that he needed to put himself in God's hands completely. My friend calls this surrender—giving himself completely to God's direction.

His decision of obedience, and his efforts to stay faithful has an impact on his life. The truth of God impacts him more than just on Sunday mornings. He changed the way he did business, the values that he used to make business decisions. For instance, the company he owns often hires recovering alcoholics and addicts. He reaches out to them to support them so that they also might

know the grace and power of Jesus. They even have an AA meeting in his shop to support their recovery.

This is not a merchant like the merchants described by Amos. This is a merchant committed to continuing steadfast in the faith. This is not the path of a man looking to the world for his values. He's not making up his own priorities because it suits him. My friend is submitted to the truth—the truth revealed in Jesus Christ who gave himself for us. My friend embraced Jesus who embraced him and brought him new life.

When the world around us pursues the priorities of the self, or chases after the latest trends and fashions, seek the truth of God. When nature in all its beauty feels like a comforting substitute for God, seek the truth of God who made it. When your life hits frustration and you discover your own brokenness, seek the truth of the God who loves you and wants to restore you. Seek the truth of God in Jesus Christ.