

The Image of the Invisible God
Colossians 1:15-28

Col. 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 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. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 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. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 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.

Col. 1:21 And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— 23 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.

Col. 1:24 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. 25 I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. 27 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. 28 It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

COMPETING VIEWS OF GOD

What is your image of God?

How we view God determines to a large extent how we view the world. The converse is true as well.
How we view the world influences our image of God.

Someone put an interesting article about atheists on the church bulletin board. In 2009 they plastered buses in Chicago with this provocative twist on Genesis, "In the beginning man created God."

This year they have a new sign for the buses, “Sleep in on Sunday.”

So, if we believe that in the beginning man created God, then men and women are the true power in the universe. It’s all up to us. We are (to once again use the Genesis language) like gods. We are the masters of our own fate, the captains of our own ship. Make no mistake about it. Even atheists have a “god.” Their image of God looks a whole lot like us!

There are other images of God. Some people think of God as an angry judge. God is out to get us unless we come up with the right answers when it comes to faith.

Still others think of God as that distant prime mover. God is the great watchmaker who created this marvelous universe and then left it to run on its own for as long as it will run.

PRACTICAL ATHEISTS

Now I know that most of us here today have a different view of God ... at least that’s what we say. But, lets be honest. Sometimes our actions do not match our words.

Sometimes we are what I would call “practical atheists”. We act as if it’s all up to us. We do exactly what we want to do and try to justify it ... as if we were gods. And no one needs to put a sign on a bus in order for us to sleep in on Sundays!

Sometimes we become very negative about the world. We say things like,

“I just don’t know what this world is coming to.”

What does this say about our view of God? Our deep and abiding pessimism suggests that we don’t have much faith in the power of God or we believe that God is an absentee Landlord.

If we see God as an angry judge then all our efforts will be toward giving the right answer so that we can go to heaven instead of hell. Our version of religion will be self-centered and judgmental because that is how we see God.

That article on atheism ended with an analysis from a professor of religion.

He wrote that in “many respects this is not a friendly environment” for people of faith.

NOT A FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

He's right of course. Faith in general and Christians in particular are not in favor with a large portion of the population. More than that, Christians are deeply divided over doctrinal and political controversies.

A line from the hymn, *The Church's One Foundation*, comes to mind. That hymn talks about how a "scornful" world sees the church as "oppressed" and internally the church is "by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed."

That describes the church in our day. We are under attack from within and from without. The world thinks we are irrelevant and the church seems hopelessly divided over what seems like very petty issues.

But, don't think that this is something new. The hymn, "*The Church's One Foundation*" was written in 1864, but this struggle has been with us from the very beginning.

In fact the struggle to maintain the true faith in a hostile environment provides the background for Paul's letter to the Colossians. William Barclay in his commentary on this passage suggests that there

were some in Colossae who wanted to turn the Christian faith into a philosophy that would be compatible with the predominant philosophy of the day, a religious philosophy called Gnosticism.

In essence the Gnostics believed that the world was bad. God was far removed from this evil creation and that the goal of faith was to become more “spiritual,” more otherworldly. (You may have noticed that this sounds a lot like some versions of “Christianity” that are espoused today.)

But, in fact this is exactly the opposite of what Christians believe. Christians believe that God was in Christ. Christians believe that God decided to reveal Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus. In Jesus (as John’s gospel put it) the Word “became flesh and dwelt among us.”

In Jesus we see that God is not a figment of our imagination nor is God an impersonal “force” of nature. God is with us. God is part of the human experience in a personal way. God is active in the world today.

And in Jesus we see what Paul calls the “image of the invisible God.” In Jesus the mystery of the ages is revealed. In Jesus we see the human face of God.

THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

That phrase, the “image of the invisible God” is filled with meaning. In the ancient world the image of a ruler was stamped on a coin. In this way the coin made the ruler visible and “omnipresent” among his subjects.

The coin reminded the people that no matter where they went or what they did they were subjects of the king. The king and the king’s power was a part of every transaction.

That’s what Paul is saying about Jesus. He bears the very stamp of God. In Jesus we see an image of the divine, and that divinity is with us in our daily life. Instead of God being removed from human existence, God is with us.

In Jesus we see a clear and accurate picture of God.

Verse 19 makes the point more emphatically. In Jesus the “fullness” of God was pleased to dwell. A literal translation of the Greek might be, “the whole fullness of God was pleased to dwell” in Jesus.

Paul wanted to make this point in the strongest possible terms. In a pluralistic world, a world that was largely hostile to the Christian faith, Jesus was (and is) the unique self-revelation of the divine.

You do not have to look anywhere else to see the nature of God. The fullness of God dwelt in Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God.

JESUS IS THE WAY

In our pluralistic world some people decry the fact that Christians say Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to God except through him. (John 14:6) You often hear people say something like, “There are many ways to God. Jesus is just one of them.”

Certainly we should respect and affirm what is good in other religions.

But, it is not respectful to change a religion into something that it is not. Just like the Gnostics of Paul’s day many religions today think that the idea of God becoming a part of this “evil” world is crazy. More than that they think that it is heretical.

But, in fact that is exactly what we believe. When we say that God was in Christ, we say that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (See John 1) This is the heart of the Christian faith.

So, from a logical standpoint either they are right and we are wrong or we are right and they are wrong. Either Jesus was who he said he was or he was delusional. There is not middle ground.

Sometimes being respectful of other religions (or philosophies) is being willing to say plainly how we differ from them. We do this not out of spite or anger but out of conviction.

Let me warn you. Just as it was in Paul's day many today will try to get you to change what you believe to make the Christian faith more "acceptable" to the world at large.

In our lesson for today Paul warns the Colossians about this. He reminds them that when they accepted Jesus as their Savior, their life changed for the better. They were new creations. The hostility and evil in their life was replaced with a new, holy way of living.

But, they had to be careful not to stray from the gospel of God's grace that had been revealed to them in Jesus. They had to hold fast to this hope.

The same is true for us.

THE IMAGE OF GOD IN US

When we say that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, it not only means that we see a clear picture of God; it also means we see a clear picture of what it means to be a human being.

In Jesus we see an image of what God has created us to be. I think that's what Paul means in verse 15 when he refers to Jesus as the "firstborn of creation."

In the creation story from the book of Genesis we hear God say, "Let us make men (and women) in our own image." (Genesis 1:26-27) Amazingly men and women were created to be a reflection of God's glory.

Unfortunately we know the rest of the story. In the book of Genesis (and in our own lives) we find that this image of God is obscured by our sinful ways.

But, in the life of Jesus we can see what my theology professor once called a Christian humanism. If we want to see what it really means to be human, we look to Jesus. And if we turn away from Jesus we turn away not only from God we also turn away from the person we are meant to be in Christ Jesus.

So, when we say that Jesus is the image of the invisible God there are some very practical implications for how we should live.

CHRISTIAN OPTIMISM

First, Christians are called to be optimistic about the world.

Christians believe that in Jesus we see the image of the invisible God. Christians believe that God was in Christ and the Spirit of the risen Christ dwells among us even today. And so Christians are able to sing today and every day, “This is My Father’s World.”

Paul wrote in our lesson for today,

16 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. 17 He himself

is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

This is one lesson that Christians desperately need to learn. We are often so negative about the world. We act as if the actions of ruthless politicians and greedy bankers on Wall Street will bring an early end to the world.

Paul says don't believe that. No matter what happens guess who's in charge? It is not the rulers or the powers that be. God is in charge, and in the life of Jesus we see how all things work together for God's good plan. (Romans 8:28)

What men and women mean for evil God uses for good. God takes our sinful actions and overrules them. The power of God to save is greater than our power to destroy. No matter what happens remember that this is our Father's world, and in Jesus Christ we see the heart of our Heavenly Father.

PEACE AND THE CROSS

That brings us to the second practical implication of our lesson for today. In the cross of Christ we see the power of God's salvation. In verse 20 our lesson for today we read,

20 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.

The cross of Christ takes center stage in the letters of Paul, the gospels and the life of the church. There's a reason that the cross plays such a prominent role in the architecture of the church. It is at the heart of the Christian faith.

But, how is the cross an instrument of reconciliation? How can blood shed bring peace?

On the one hand the cross represents the worst that we human beings can do. God sent his Son into the world to save the world. And what did we (the world) do? We crucified him.

What do you think would happen if Jesus didn't come over 2,000 years ago but came today? Do you think that we would accept his message?

Do you think that we would like the idea of loving our enemies and doing good to those that persecute you? Do you think that we would like the idea that we should show justice and mercy toward the poor and the oppressed?

I don't think so.

We would crucify Jesus all over again just as the disciples of Jesus in this day and time are “crucified” for what they believe. The religion professor had it right. We live in a culture that is hostile to the Christian faith.

But, remember the rest of the story. The crucified One didn't stay crucified! In verse 17 Paul refers to Jesus as the “firstborn from the dead.”

In light of the resurrection the blood of Christ is more than just a testament to the inhumanity of man. It has become a testament to the peace that passes all understanding. It has become a testament to the power of God's forgiveness. When we do our worst. God does His best.

However you have failed, whatever your sin, God in Christ tells you that peace is possible. You don't have to remain an enemy of God. God's power to save is greater than the pull of our sin.

In Jesus Christ we can receive forgiveness and be reconciled with God. We can find peace in our lives,

and we are enabled to bring peace to a world that so desperately needs it. (Colossians 1:21)

THE MEASURE OF MATURITY

The third practical point that our lesson makes for today is that Jesus is the measure of maturity. (Colossians 1:28) Since Jesus is the example of what it means to be truly human, we are called to follow in his steps.

In our lesson for today we learned that this is not only our goal but also the goal of the Christian community. Jesus is the head of the church, the body. (Colossians 1:18) Just as the head tells the body what to do, so Jesus tells us what to do.

This, of course, is a task that is beyond all of us. We are all sinners who fall far short of Christian maturity. Compared to other human beings we might look pretty good at times. Compared to Jesus we don't look so good.

But, this is not a reason to despair. The call to maturity is the call to be changed by the example of God's love as shown in the life of Jesus. Unconditional love makes us more loving. Forgiveness makes us more forgiving.

And though we can never attain the level of love and forgiveness that Jesus has shown us in his life, we can still be changed significantly by His example.

The word translated “maturity” in verse 28 is the Greek word, “telos.” A better dynamic translation of this word is “an example that leads us toward the future.” It is not a perfection that we have today, but it is an example that gets us on the road to holiness.

Let me give you a simple example. As many of you know I’ve taken up ballroom dancing in these past few years. Just recently my favorite teacher has opened up shop in Osceola County, and Carrollyn and I are taking lessons again.

One of the ways I learn is to try and copy my teacher. She is much better than I. I will never be able to dance like her. However, by imitating her dance steps very carefully I can get better.

Far from being a frustrating experience many of us have found this striving to get better to be fun. In fact we now have a large group of students who love to gather each week and struggle to learn new steps. Our common striving to learn dance has made us into a kind of family.

This is how the church works.

We are a community formed by a common love for Jesus. We strive to follow his compassion. We strive to make his justice and forgiveness a reality in our world. We struggle together to make our steps align more precisely with the steps of our Master.

Will we ever reach full maturity in this lifetime? Of course we won't.

But, that should not discourage us.

We are on the way to Christian maturity, and the example of Jesus helps us make our steps more precise. We follow him together as a family of faith.

He is indeed the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." And he will lead us every step of the way.

Amen.