

Sermon: The Image of God Colossians 1:11-20

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First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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GRILLED CHEESE IMAGE

Where do we find the image of God? That question was in the news this past week. I bet you'll never guess where someone found an image of God. They found it in a grilled cheese sandwich!

That's right. Someone was auctioning off a grilled cheese sandwich on E-bay that purported to contain an image of the Virgin Mary. Who would have thought that a miracle could come from a George Foreman grill?

Actually, the folks at E-Bay thought it was all a joke and pulled the ad from their listings. But, no, it turned out to be true. It was a real sandwich that just happened to bear the image of a young woman. (How they knew it was the Virgin Mary, I don't know. But, that's what they said and the bidding was supposedly in the thousands of dollars.)

Of course this is not the first time something like this has happened. People have seen visions of God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary on rocks, trees and in one recent case in Florida, even on the side of a bank building. People make pilgrimages to see these "miracles." For some it was a very important spiritual event.

There's an easy explanation for why this happens. All of us tend to see images in patterns that are essentially random. For example, psychologists used to give a personality test called the Rorschach. It was essentially a series of symmetrical inkblots that were made by folding a piece of paper in half.

Over the years the typical responses of various groups was tabulated, and it became possible to predict the mindset of some individuals by how they responded to these random inkblots. It made me wonder about the grilled cheese sandwich people. What kinds of people were willing to pay so much for a strange looking grilled cheese sandwich? Who was this desperate to see an image of the divine?

LOOKING FOR GOD IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

This is an extreme example, but I believe there are many people today who are looking for God in all the wrong places. They say things like, "I'm a spiritual person but I don't believe in any type of organized religion." (Does that mean they believe in disorganized religion!) I

guess they wouldn't really want to say that, but quite often that's how it turns out.

If faith is not based upon revelation, that is, if faith is not based upon something or someone that comes from above and beyond us, then what we are left with is a faith based only upon our own feelings and intuition. It's all up to us, and there is no objective way to decide if a faith is true or false.

I am reminded of the movie, Bull Durham. Susan Sarandon plays a woman who is religious about baseball. She even has a shrine to baseball in her home complete with candles, and she spends all of her energy and time helping and getting to know the heroes of the local baseball team.

That may sound silly to us, but I assure you that there are some Boston Red Sox fans who "got religion" in the playoffs this past season!

Human beings have the capacity to worship almost anything, and quite often we worship things that are not worthy of our ultimate affection.

Worship needs to be based upon something deeper than an emotional reaction to a cheese sandwich or a baseball game or beautiful music or warm familiar feelings.

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

A similar situation prompted Paul's letter to the Colossians. Many had tried to adapt the message of Christianity to the popular philosophies and religions of the area. It was like what happens today when some people say things like, "Yes, Jesus was special. He was God's son and so were Buddha, Moses, Socrates, Mohammed" and whatever religious or historical figures that particular person deems to be important.

This kind of religious relativism always reminds me of the question that Jesus asked his disciples. He asked, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples knew what the people were saying. Some thought he was a great teacher in a long line of great teachers. Some thought he was a great prophet in a long line of great prophets.

And then Jesus asked another question, "But, what about you. Who do you say that I am?" And the apostle Peter with an insight given by God's Spirit said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16; Luke 9:20; Mark 8:29)

In other words, Jesus is not just one teacher out of many. Jesus is the teacher. Jesus is the definitive revelation of God and God's will. That's what Paul is saying in an even more powerful way in his letter to the Colossians. Paul wrote that Jesus is the "image of the

invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE

Norman McMurry tells about a palace in the city of Rome that has a great high dome. Inside that dome is a famous painting. But, it's very hard to see the painting because the dome is so massive. In order to help visitors appreciate the scope and intricacy of the painting, a huge table was placed immediately beneath the dome, and on that table was placed a gigantic mirror.

When the visitor looks into the mirror, he or she is able to see the majestic painting far above. What cannot be clearly seen because of its enormity can be seen clearly in this reflection.

That is a description of Christ. Without Christ, God would be an unknown. For all practical purposes, God would be “invisible.” But, God has chosen to reveal Himself in the person of Christ. Christ is the “mirror-image” of God. Through the life of Christ and the presence of His Spirit, we are enabled to see clearly what would be impossible for us to see otherwise.

But, there is more.

Not only is Christ the “image of the invisible God,” Christ is also called the “firstborn of all creation.”

Now what does that mean?

It means that Jesus not only is a reflection of what God is like, Jesus also is a reflection of what humanity was meant to be.

When we make the seemingly contradictory statement that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, this is what we mean. In Jesus we see a perfect reflection of the divine and the human.

Jesus not only shows us who God is, he also shows us who we were meant to be.

I think a popular praise and worship song puts it something like this, “He is Lord of creation and Lord of my life.” That sums up the Christian view nicely. Jesus is Lord of creation and Lord of my life.

In other words, if Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” then Jesus is in charge of everything, including our lives.

HEAD OF THE CHURCH

But, so many of us, even many in the church, are unwilling to accept that. Why? We are unwilling to accept Jesus as Lord because it means giving up control. Many of us are control freaks, even when it comes to our faith. This passage suggests that we need to get over it.

At the very beginning of our Presbyterian operating manual that we call the Book of Order, there is a statement about Christ. In the first paragraph of a section entitled "preliminary principles" we read,

"All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above every rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body."

We are not the master of our fate as the poet put it. Jesus is the master of our fate. He is, according to our passage for today, the head of the body.

The head is the controller of the body. It is the head that tells the rest of the body what to do (except in the case of some of us who listen to what the stomach says first, but that's another story!). Jesus is the head of the church. It is because of Jesus that the church was formed, and it is at his bidding that the church lives.

LETTING THE MASTER PLAY

In a large stone cathedral in Europe there was a large, magnificent pipe organ. It was Saturday afternoon, and the janitor was making one final check of the choir and organ loft high in the balcony in the back of the church.

He was startled to hear footsteps echoing up the stone stairway. He thought that the doors were all locked and no one was around. He turned to see a man in slightly tattered clothing coming toward him.

Excuse me sir," the stranger said, "I have come from quite a distance to see the great organ in this cathedral. Would you mind opening the console so that I might get a closer look at it?" The janitor at first refused, but the stranger seemed so eager and insistent that he finally gave in.

"May I sit on the bench?" The custodian met the request of the stranger with absolute refusal. "What if the organist came in and found you sitting there! I would lose my job."

But, again the stranger was so persistent that the custodian gave in. "Only for a moment," he said.

The custodian noticed that the stranger seemed to be very much at home on the organ bench. He wasn't completely surprised when the stranger asked him if he could play the organ.

"No! No one is allowed to play it except the cathedral organist."

The man's face fell, and his deep disappointment was obvious. He reminded the custodian how far he had come and assured him that no damage would be done. Finally, after much discussion, the custodian relented and told the stranger he could play the instrument, but only a few notes and then he would have to leave.

Overjoyed the stranger pulled out some stops and began to play. Suddenly the cathedral was filled with the most beautiful music the custodian had ever heard in his life. He said that it seemed to transport him heavenward.

In what seemed like all too short a time, the dowdy stranger stopped playing, slid off the organ bench and started down the stairway.

The custodian cried out, "Wait! That was the most beautiful music I have ever heard in the cathedral. Who are you?" The stranger turned for just a moment as he replied, "Mendelssohn." The man was none other than Felix Mendelssohn, one of the greatest organists and composers of the nineteenth century!

The cathedral custodian was alone now in the great building, the beautiful organ music still ringing in his ears. He said softly, "Just think. I almost kept the master from playing music in my cathedral!"

Is that not a parable of what we often do in the church? We do not recognize the Master when He comes unexpectedly into our lives. We are so worried about the details of church life that we forget the whole purpose of this place is to allow the Master to play beautiful music.

Let's not keep the master from playing his music. Remember, this is not our church. It is His.

THE MUSIC OF GRACE

And the music we play is the beautiful music of grace and forgiveness. The most important thing we need to know about King Jesus is that his throne is a cross and his goal is not conquest but forgiveness.

In verses 19 and 20 of today's lesson we read,

[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. Colossians 1:19-20 (NRSV)

The cross reminds us that the salvation of God in Jesus did not come easily and should not be taken lightly. The peace and forgiveness that is ours in Christ Jesus is a result of blood shed and a life given. As Jesus told his disciples, the greatest gift a person can give is to lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13) This is what Jesus did out of love for us. Jesus has called us his friends.

In days gone by, during hard times in the darkness of winter in an Alaskan Eskimo village, a young man of unequalled courage might go out into the bitter cold in search of food for his people. Armed only with a pointed stick and his compassion for his starving village, he would wander, anticipating the attack of a polar bear.

Having no natural fear of humans, a polar bear will stalk and eat a man. In the attack the Eskimo hunter would wave his hands and spear to anger the bear and make him rise up on his hind legs. The bear would often stand over ten feet in height.

And then, with the spear braced to his foot, the hunter would aim for the heart as the weight of the bear came down on the spear.

With heart pierced, the bear still often lived long enough to maim or kill this noble hunter. And so loving family and friends would then follow his tracks out of the village and find food for their survival and evidence of profound courage.

Early missionaries proclaimed to attentive ears that Jesus Christ is the "Good Hunter" who lays down his life for the world.

This is our image of God.

God is not a fleeting image found on a cheese sandwich. God is not a creation of our own desires and imagination. God is reflected in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a reflection of grace and sacrifice.

ETHICS IS GRATITUDE

I read two very simple but profound sentences this past week by a commentator from the 19th century. He wrote, "Theology is grace. Ethics is gratitude."

In other words, when we look at the image of God as reflected in Jesus Christ, it is a picture of underserved salvation and forgiveness. From the throne of the cross, King Jesus proclaimed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

That is the essence of theology. That is what we need to know about God. But, how do we respond to such a message? Like the Alaskan villagers who found their salvation in the courage of the good hunter, our response should be one of profound gratitude.

Ethics is gratitude. The reason we want to serve, the reason we want to forgive is not that we are trying to somehow earn God's salvation. Salvation has already been given to us. Salvation has already been earned on the cross by the blood of Jesus.

We forgive because on the cross we have already been forgiven. It is a response of gratitude.

This Thursday we will once again celebrate our national holiday of Thanksgiving. We will stuff ourselves with turkey and watch football on TV as some team beats the Detroit Lions.

But, though Thanksgiving is not necessarily a Christian holiday, I would suggest to you that we can celebrate it in a Christian way.

Those of us who have seen the face of King Jesus on the cross have seen the face of profound sacrifice and love. And yet we have also seen the power of God for salvation.

As we come to the end of another Christian year and prepare to once again celebrate Advent, let us reflect upon the heart of our faith. Let us give thanks with a grateful heart for the image of God that we see in Jesus Christ.

And may that image of grace be reflected in our daily lives.

Amen.

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