

“The Image of the Invisible God”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, July 22, 2007

Text: Psalm 52:1-9 Colossians 1:15-29 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, quiet the distractions of our minds and calm the anxieties of our hearts, so that we may only hear your voice during this time of worship. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

In the summer of 1993, Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited the American troops serving in Somalia. On one day he made a grueling 23 stops in 20 hours. In a *Life* magazine article, he said, “Meeting the troops – that’s what it’s all about.”

At one base General Powell shook hands with 400 hundred GIs and posed with them for photographs. A picture accompanying the *Life* article shows one such scene. Surrounded by a sea of troops, Powell has his arms around two soldiers as one of them holds his own camera at arm’s length to take the shot.

Why did Powell take time for this in the middle of his heavy schedule? Because he couldn’t forget what happened on one visit to the Old Soldiers Home in Washington, D.C. As he went from room to room in the hospital, veterans proudly showed him their faded snapshots taken with their commanding officers. Powell said, “That picture they had taken 40 years ago with their general was the high point of their lives.”

The high point of a Christian's life is similar. The high point of a Christian's life is his relationship with Jesus Christ.

Today we are going to examine the last half of the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians. We will discover who Jesus Christ is, what he has done for us, and our response to that incredible grace.

When we see the glory of God in Jesus Christ, we want that glory to shine through us to bring light to the world.

The apostle Paul writes that Christ is "the image of the invisible God." To understand this concept, we are automatically faced with a challenge. What most people mean by "God" in Western culture of the 21st century is the god of Enlightenment Deism. This far-off, detached being may perhaps have been responsible in some sense or other for the creation of the world. But this god is basically remote, inaccessible and certainly not involved with the day-to-day life, let alone the day-to-day pain, of the world. This understanding of god is not the God of Judeo-Christian tradition through the centuries. Our God is an active, involved, compassionate God, concerned about the events of our lives and the pain of the world.

Another challenge to understanding Paul's words is having a right understanding of Jesus. Hardly anyone who hears the full story of Jesus and learns the true facts of his life and teaching, crucifixion and resurrection, walks away with a shrug of the shoulders – dismissing him as unimportant. People ignorant of the story or misinformed about it, of course, regularly dismiss him. But with few exceptions, the others realize instinctively that they are dealing with a most remarkable person.

It is quite common for those who consider Jesus truly important to include others who seem to be equally important in his company – Buddha, Moses,

Socrates and Mohammed. For these people, Jesus is important, but not central. His prestige is considerable, but he is not preeminent.

Some Christians in the town of Colossae seem to have had this kind of understanding. For them, cosmic forces of one sort or another were getting equal billing with Jesus. Paul writes to them in an attempt to restore Jesus, the Messiah, to the center of their lives. He argues that Christ occupies the center of creation and salvation.

Paul writes, “He is the image of the invisible God.” (1:15) If you want to see what God is like, look at Jesus. The Greek word that is translated image is eikon. An eikon was a representation, or a reproduction with precise likeness. A portrait of a person’s likeness or an image of a Roman governor or hero on a coin was an eikon. Paul says that Jesus Christ was that – a representation of God the Creator-Father. The word eikon also means manifestation. More than being in the likeness of God, as are all people who are created, Jesus was God Himself in human incarnation. In the body of one human, Jesus of Nazareth, God was incarnated.

Jesus is also “the firstborn of all creation.” (1:15) Christ existed as God’s Son before he became Jesus. Theologian Leander Keck explains it this way, “Because (Christ) was before (Christ) became a person, he could be spoken of as preexisting. What early Christians claimed was that this pre-existing reality became Jesus. They did not hold that Jesus pre-existed. Rather what pre-existed was God’s son who became Jesus. All incarnational Christology rests on such a conceptual basis.”

Paul continues this magnificent hymn of Christ’s identity: “In him all things in heaven and on earth were created. . . all things have been created through him and for him.” (1:16) This is not a scientific statement but a theological statement. In Jesus Christ we see the clue to God’s purposes of creation.

British scholar Donald English writes, “The heartbeat of the created universe is that which we have seen in Jesus Christ. His love, His self-giving, the way He liberates people, His sense of the presence of God everywhere, His way of reading life so that there is time and eternity intimately mixed up – all of this is the heartbeat of the created universe.”

This means that in Christ is the basic clue for meeting all of the world’s big problems – violence, terrorism, war, racism, hunger and starvation, AIDS, illiteracy, global warming, pollution – because Christ is the “heartbeat” of the entire created universe.

Christ is also “the head of the body, the church.” (1:18) He is the head of the church, not merely in the sense of being the most important member or having control, but rather in the sense that all the forces of the body are brought together in the head. The head is the seat of life and will which permeates all the members, uniting them into an organic whole. Christ, as head, energizes the Body, giving life and power.

We who make up the Church are not operating out of human wisdom and strength alone. We are a new creation, a fellowship of resurrection life.

RECONCILED!

Paul then writes in this letter about what Christ has done for us. “Through (Christ) God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things. . . .” (1:20)

Reconciliation is a central experience of the Christian faith. The word “reconcile” is pivotal for Paul. Paul had a passion for mission because he knew the soul’s despair, when he cried, “O wretched man that I am!” Paul was driven by a breathless gratitude because he knew that Christ had reconciled him to God. What about us? Do we have that sense of gratitude?

Paul describes the Colossians and us: “You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.” (1:21) The reformer Martin Luther insisted that people must confront their own sinfulness in all its ravaging depths before they can enjoy the comforts of salvation. It is important for us to remember who we are: forgiven sinners.

When we put ourselves at the center of the universe, when we view ourselves as most important, we become estranged from God. Sin has many manifestations. In the fourth century it was clearly identified and labeled as the seven deadly sins – pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust.

In the 21st century, sin can manifest itself in the emptiness we know, the feeling that we are driven, our lack of confidence, our fear of relationships and our terror of the future. Our hoarding of ourselves and our talents, and our profane extravagance and waste of material possessions – all these witness to sin and its tenacious pull upon our lives.

Pastor Ken Fong explains the awareness of our sin and estrangement this way: Everyone’s a rat. There are no squirrels. He told his congregation, “Some of you think you’re just a cute little squirrel sinner. Who hates a squirrel? Have I got news for you. Everyone’s a rat. God doesn’t see any squirrels. (I would add that we are not cute Parisian rats, like in the current movie, *Ratatouille*.)

Ken was teaching at a drug rehabilitation center. When he asked, “How many feel like a rat?” everybody raised their hands right away. Later he was preaching at a seminary chapel and he asked the same question, “How many feel like a rat?” He continued, “Some of you are raising your hands because you know I’m theologically correct, but you don’t feel like a rat. Some of us are rats because we’re not convinced we are rats. We look around and think that someone else is a bigger rat, that someone else needs the cross more than I do.”

Only when you know you are a rat are you ready for the next part – God is not an exterminator. That is the good news. God did not send Jesus to condemn the world, but to save the world.

“Through (Christ) God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (1:20) The channel of reconciliation was the blood of the Cross. The dynamic of reconciliation was the death of Christ. Paul said it this way in his letter to the Romans, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (Romans 8:32) In the death of Jesus, God is saying to us, “I love you that much. I love you enough to watch my Son suffer and die for you.” The Cross is the proof that there is no length to which the love of God will refuse to go in order to reconcile us to him.

Mark Schultz is a contemporary Christian singer. The title track from his latest album, *Broken and Beautiful*, begins this way:

“There’s a businessman/ There’s a widowed wife/ There’s a drug-addicted, shattered life/ There’s a teenage girl with a choice to make/ It’s crowded here in church today/ And the preacher says as the sermon ends/ Please close your eyes and bow your heads/ Is there anyone in need of prayer?/ Jesus wants to meet you here/ ‘Cause we all fall short/ We all have sinned/ But when you let God’s Grace break in/ It’s beautiful, beautiful/ Come as you are/ Surrender your heart/ Broken and beautiful/ . . .

“Cause there’s nothing more beautiful to God/ Than when his sons and daughters come/”

Eugene Peterson paraphrases what this reconciliation means in *The Message*: “By giving himself completely at the Cross, actually dying for you, Christ brought you over to God’s side and put your lives together, whole and holy in his presence. You don’t walk away from a gift like that!” (1:22-23)

CHRIST IN US – THE HOPE OF GLORY

We have seen what God in Christ has done for us. Now, what is our response? Once we have glimpsed this portrait of Christ, the responsibility is on us to reflect it as individuals, and to reflect it as a community – as Duke Memorial United Methodist Church. Once we see who Jesus is, we are not only called to follow him in worship, love and adoration. We are compelled to shape our world by reflecting his glory into it.

We see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We discover this not for our own benefit, but so that the glory may shine in us and through us, to bring light and life to the world that still waits in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Paul explains it in this letter to the Colossians. He writes, “The mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations . . . Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (1:26-27)

Christ, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, and the head of the church, lives in us by the Holy Spirit. His dwelling in us is the hope of glory. That is how we can impact our world.

As we confess and repent of our sins, we are forgiven. We are accepted by God and enter into a new relationship with him. We are saved, reconciled, forgiven by his grace. God then lives in us through the power of his Spirit as the indwelling Christ.

With that indwelling power, we join the mission. Paul writes, “It is (Christ) whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.” (1:28-29)

One of my dreams for this church is that we work diligently to introduce people to Christ and then do all that we can to “present them mature in Christ.”

We teach them how to live as Christians whether they are adults, youth or children.

I read recently of a woman in Africa who accepted Christ. Overwhelmed with gratitude, she wanted to do something for Jesus and his kingdom. She was blind and 70 years old. She was uneducated. What could she do? She came to the missionary with her French Bible and said, "Would you mind underlining John 3:16 in my Bible in red?" (That's the verse that reads, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.")

The missionary was very intrigued to see what she was going to do. The woman took her Bible and sat in front of a boys' school in the afternoon. When school was dismissed, she would call to a boy or two and say to them, "Boys, come here please. Do you know French?" Very proudly, they responded that they did. Then she would ask, "Please read to me this passage underlined in red in my Bible." They did. Then she would ask, "Do you know what it means?" They would say, "No, we don't know." Then she would tell them the story of Jesus.

The missionary reported that 24 young men eventually became pastors because of the work of this blind woman. The Holy Spirit empowered her to share the light of Christ with those students.

The Lord of all creation has reconciled us to him through the death of Jesus on the cross. Christ lives in us. This is the hope of glory. The apostle Paul worked and struggled to tell everyone about this incredible news and way to live. What can you do to reflect God's glory in your life to bring light to the world? What will you do to share the light of Christ with others?

That is a very personal question. So we are going to have some moments for silent prayer, seated in your pew. I invite you to pray to God about that

question, “What will you do to share the light of Christ with others?” Then I will conclude our prayer time. Let us pray.

Closing prayer: O God, we praise you that you love us so much that you have reconciled us – sinners forgiven by your grace -- to you through the Cross of Jesus Christ. Thank you. Thank you for dwelling in us by the power of your Holy Spirit. Empower us to express your love to everyone whom we know and meet. Confirm and strengthen every commitment made here this morning. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.