

## **Pentecost 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday “The Mystery of Reconciliation” Col 1 15-29**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Today’s Epistle is one of the most amazing passages of Scripture. For Christians of this generation, and especially Christians of North America who have watched as fires have torched enormous forests in the West, floods have inundated repeatedly, and who seem to be incapable of satisfying our thirst for things and more things, this is a message of particular importance: God loves the whole of his creation.

In order to understand Paul’s message here, we have to take note of the number of times the word “things” appears therein. I have at least six, and that is because our translators were trying to avoid too much repetition. Simply put, this is the cosmic Christ who is not just reconciling our souls to himself, but the whole of his creation, yes, our bodies too, but also the waters of the Gulf, the landfills, the rivers, the trees, the rocks, and the birds and all the rest of his creation.

For Paul, in prison, this has serious implications and we will do well to follow them for they apply to all of us. Notice that the Colossians have been reconciled to God through the body of Jesus’ flesh. Paul is contesting the very ancient Greek and very modern idea that God only cares about “spiritual” or non-physical things. This is simply not so. Jesus shed his real red, sticky, salty blood to save the physical world, including my and your physical self.

The ancient Greek idea, which Paul opposed, devalued the physical realm. To the Greeks, God was spirit, so He was only concerned about the spiritual things. The physical things of life were considered as a prison of sorts, to be escaped in the next life. The truly spiritual soul would be freed from this. Of course, this meant this physical life was not terribly important, in much the same way that an imprisoned man really is not concerned about the state of the prison. He just wants to put it behind him and never see it or think about it again. One sometimes finds Christians sitting in the pews who still hold this idea. They will say that one should not cry at funerals, the body is just a husk, the real life is in heaven, etc. The Bible never says this.

Outside the Church, however, one finds another sort of issue, and inside the Church it is often disavowed verbally but functionally it operates as well. Modernity has oddly come at this question of God and creation from the other direction and ended up in much the same place. Since the enlightenment we have increasingly demythologized creation, essentially taken God out of the picture. The planets are not held in orbit about the sun by divine power, but by a force of gravitation operating in predictable and regular ways. Likewise, the color of my eyes, the fact my hair is gray, or the fact that my back hurts, has nothing to do with God, but is the result of genetics, stress, and poor lifting technique.

If God is active at all in this, He is the divine legislator who wrote the law of Gravity and now is watching it all play out from a distance. Most Christians today are functionally deists in this regard. God is up there, but he is not actively or intimately engaged in my life or this world. He might intervene if I am in extreme duress, but He mostly ignores the mundane realities of my life. The only exception is if my conscience goads me, then I am pretty sure God is watching, but it is always to judge me.

If you ask most Christians what is the opposite of spiritual, they will say, "physical." But Paul does not agree with them. The opposite of spiritual is actually "worldly." Is a car a spiritual thing? On one hand, it has no soul. But on the other it is a spiritual thing. I use it to make home and hospital visits; I haul my groceries home in it to care for my body, I go to church and vacation. For these reasons and more, my car is a spiritual thing. I say so because all those activities are actually serving God. He gave me a congregation and my neighbor to care for; He gave me the body to feed, and He created and redeemed the whole of my life. That vehicle, in making that life better, sweeter, or even just functional, is a spiritual thing. In its physicality it is used in relationship to God.

My car can also be a worldly or fleshly thing, if it feeds my pride; if it hinders my service to God; if I have bought a car because my midlife crisis led me to purchase a vehicle which is totally inappropriate for my vocation, say the Audi TT I saw the other day or the Ferrari which caught my son's eye. That might be a less than spiritual vehicle. Likewise, my grocery money can be just as spiritual as my offering, but that is not necessarily so.

If I fill my grocery cart with unhealthy things and poorly serve myself and loved ones by the choices that I make, it might be a worldly or fleshly sort of thing. And depending on what I buy at the grocery store, it might be increasingly fleshly as I pack on the pounds!

Paul proclaims a God who has redeemed all things by taking up “thingliness” to himself in the incarnation of Christ. We cannot say God became a thing – that would suggest that God changes, but God took up into himself the nature of created humanity. This is important and Paul makes that connection immediately. Christ’s physical death and resurrection present us holy and blameless before God.

It is absolutely critical to notice that the Colossians and we are enjoined to continue in the faith, not attain to it. Salvation is not a goal but a starting point for the Christian. We already have it. Remember, this is one of the themes of the whole book. Paul has folks who are disdainful of the faith of the simple and holding up knowledge as some sort of superior gift. Paul is not anti-knowledge, but he thinks they have the ordering of these gifts backward. One can grow in the gift of knowledge or even have very little of it and still be saved. In Paul’s sense here, faith is the primary gift of God, and as he means it, Faith is a yes or no sort of thing. One either has it or one does not. But again, notice that this faith is proclaimed in all creation. You might want to remember that in Romans 8 Paul speaks of all creation groaning as it awaits the revealing of the sons of God.

If this is not enough, Paul takes this integration of God and his creation to a most unusual place. He rejoices in his sufferings, because God has reconciled the whole of creation, even his suffering. Remember, Christ has reconciled all things, even the whip which has lashed him, the soldier who wielded it, the blood which he shed, etc. Now, Paul’s sufferings are not only sacred as an offering to God, they are also part of God’s salvation of the world. They are somehow joined to the work of Christ on the cross.

How odd Paul’s reflection on suffering sounds to the modern ear. We tend to see our suffering as something of great evil, and indeed, heaven will be free of suffering because it is a result of the fall.

But God has reconciled all creation to himself, says Paul, and that means that nothing is beyond his redemption, even suffering.

The incarnation of Christ allows Paul to engage in his ministry with great energy. It is God working in him. He is revealing a mystery, that the Gentiles are included in the true Israel. We don't stand in awe of that in quite the same way that Paul did. After all, we are gentiles and of course we are included. Indeed, we stand in awe of the idea that Jews might be. But remember that at the time of Paul, the gentiles were thought by most Jews to be utterly lost, outside the family and kingdom of God. Now these gentiles have Christ in them, the very power of God at work in Paul the Jew is at work in them, through the vehicle of faith.

Christ Jesus entered the human story of our sinful "alien hostile mind and evil deeds" and reconciled us to himself by his death and resurrection. We are declared reconciled by Christ's "body and blood." God baptized us into this "body of flesh by his death." We are stable and steadfast by faith alone.

As the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord states in article VIII, paragraph 96: "... the Holy Scripture (Col 1:27) calls Christ the mystery, over which all heretics stumble and fall headlong. We warn all Christians that they not pry presumptuously into this mystery with their reason but simply believe with the dear apostles, shut the eyes of their reason, take their understanding captive in obedience to Christ, and take comfort and rejoice without ceasing in this: that in Christ our flesh and blood have been raised so high, to the right hand of the majesty and almighty power of God."

The story is no longer a mystery to Christians. Christ is revealed and grace-gifted to us in our baptism assuring us that the storyline continues when He presents us to his heavenly Father on judgment day in heaven and says: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!