

Understanding One Another: How Cosmic Is Christ?

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

July 9, 2017 ~ Welborne UMC

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If you are in this room this morning, we can safely make the assumption that you fall in to one of two categories. Either you are fascinated by Jesus and exploring what it means to follow him, or you've already made the choice to follow him and live as his disciples. Wherever you are on that journey, be assured, that all of us—all of us—are on a journey of learning who Jesus is. At times he comforts us. At other times he puzzles us. And at still other times, he challenges us—even making us really uncomfortable with ourselves.

We are in the second week today of a series called Understanding One Another. It's a series exploring what we, as Christians, might be able to learn from other faith traditions. Last week we talked about the importance of making friends in our multicultural world. I talked about how it is important to approach people who practice other faiths as friends, rather than as enemies.

Before we begin to be in conversation with those other faith traditions, though, we need to better understand our own. In particular, we need to understand more deeply what we believe about Jesus Christ, whose incarnation, life, death and resurrection are the defining framework of our faith. The theological term for what we believe about Jesus is called "Christology," the study of Christ. But we cannot reduce understanding Jesus to simply knowing about him with our heads. We must let Jesus know us. We must read his stories—and pray his stories. We must spend time with him, and we must let him push us and change us. We must relinquish our desire to define Jesus, and let Jesus define us. Only then can we authentically approach other faith traditions.

One of the stumbling blocks we often encounter in our journey with Jesus is that we tend to focus on him being Jesus or upon him being Christ. Our focus, though, needs to be on both. We need to be able to hold together the man Jesus, and the stories that others tell about him in the Gospels, with the pre-existent Christ. Christ means the Anointed One, and the term Christ is Jesus' title—his identity as Chosen One, the Savior. Jesus is the name Mary gave to him, which emphasized his humanity. So, when we worship Jesus the Christ, we worship Jesus the Anointed One, the one who is fully human and fully divine.

Jesus did not begin with his birth and end with his death—or even his ascension. Jesus Christ is one with God, and so existed with God from the beginning of creation, and with God for all eternity. A number of passages in the Bible underscore this pre-existence, especially the first chapter of Genesis, the first chapter of John's Gospel, the first chapter of Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians.

Why is this important? It is important, in part, because of the kinds of passages of scripture we read today, and how those passages have been distorted into an exclusivist view

of who Jesus is. In our passage from Matthew today, there is a puzzling contradiction, if you listened closely. Actually, there are a few puzzling things about this passage, but I'm going to just focus on one this morning.

First, there is verse 27, when Jesus says, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." This passage, along with a parallel in Luke 10, and a similar passage in John 3:16, have often been used to point to the particularity of Jesus as the way to the Father. But if we truly understand the nature of Jesus as fully divine as well as fully human, we know that these words do not limit knowledge of Jesus—and by extension, salvation—to those who know the man Jesus. If we believe in the cosmic nature of Christ, we understand that it might be possible to know the way of Jesus without ever having heard or read any of the Bible. Jesus Christ is revealed in God's Word—but he is not confined to God's Word.

Turning back to our scripture, Jesus follows these words about his intimate relationship with his Father with an invitation: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28, NRSV)" Come. All of you. Anyone. Anywhere. That is the invitation that Jesus, and by extension, God, offers to the whole world.

That invitation connects deeply with our United Methodist heritage. John Wesley, our founder, taught about prevenient grace, the grace that goes before. It is the grace, or love, of God, that always reaches out to us, beckoning us to come and be enfolded by God's love. God in Christ is offering an invitation to the whole world to come into the fold of God's love. I have chosen to respond to that invitation, in the circumstances of my life, by following Christ through the United Methodist Church. I believe that there are many other ways to respond to Christ's invitation to love and be loved.

It is not our task, as individual Christians, or as churches in the body of Christ, to limit that invitation that God offers. We cannot put our own strings on it. We cannot pretend that it is ours to decide who receives it and who doesn't. For that reason, understanding other faiths, and how the God of love just might be revealed in them, is a critically important task for our time. It is a task that has the potential to build a bridge of peace in a divided and angry world.

In a *Newsweek* article on Billy Graham, written in 2006, the author lifts up Graham's humility toward people of other religions. Graham is certainly someone we would characterize as sure of his faith in Jesus as the way to salvation. "When asked whether heaven will be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or secular people, though, Graham says: 'Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't.....I don't want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute.

He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have.”¹

Fundamentally, it all comes back to love. The love that welcomes us, the love that challenges us, the love that sets us free. This is the love that came to life in Jesus, and the love that continues to be embodied today and for all time in the Holy and Anointed One, Jesus Christ.

¹ With thanks to Adam Hamilton for this quote from page 111 of *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*. John Meacham, “Pilgrim’s Progress,” *Newsweek*, August 14, 2006.