

“Walking with Christ”**Colossians 2:6-15****Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake****July 28th, 2019**

This week I have been thinking about a song that I learned in Sunday School as a child—a song that many have called the *Protestant National Anthem*:

*Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red, brown, yellow
Black and white
They are precious in His sight
Jesus loves the little children
Of the world*

I remember singing it at Vacation Bible School, the teacher displaying a picture of children of every color holding hands. *“Jesus said we are all equal,”* she instructed, *“God loves everybody and you should, too.”*

The image of God conveyed in this song, of course, is that God *is a God of love*.

As one Southern Pastor has put it:

If your religion leads you to exclude people, to look for what is wrong with people, or to point out what are people’s sins, you are doing it wrong, ... If you truly want to be a follower of Jesus, the only thing you should see when you look at another person is the face of God.

The *God of Love*, however, seems to be *taking it on chin*, as of late. Even though Christians of all backgrounds have learned the *Golden Rule*—*“Due unto others,”* and the *Great Commandment*—*“Love God and love your neighbor,”* many people today seem to have decided that the *God of Love* is for *losers*. They have traded *that God* for a *tougher, stricter one* who exercises *judgment* against all who refuse to bend the knee, a kind of *Emperor-God*, enthroned in glory. This God has often shown up in Christian history. He is a *masculine Sovereign*, and a *winner-God* for

people feeling displaced in a pluralistic world. And after 9/11, this *militaristic God* became more real.¹

I am wondering this morning, *Which of these gods speaks most clearly to you?*

This is an important question because it has confronted every generation of Christians since the beginning.

You see, during the time of the early church, , many new religious movements claimed the attention and adherence of people in the Mediterranean world. Christianity itself was a new religion. And the seekers who found their way to the church also be seduced by another religion that sounded convincing.

And one question facing the early church was the nature of Christ. This is why the Letter to the Colossians affirms the *corporality* of Christ: “*for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily*” (v. 9). This tells us that the issue with which the Colossians were struggling was not the *divinity* of Christ, but the *humanity* of Christ.

This is key because (for Christians) the life and teachings of Jesus are the primary way we come to understand who God *is* and what God is *like*. As John Dominic Crossan put it: “*Jesus is what God looks like in sandals.*”

Marcus Borg said it a bit differently:

Jesus was from the peasant class. Clearly, he was brilliant. His use of language was remarkable and poetic, filled with images and stories. He had a metaphoric mind. He was not an ascetic, but world-affirming, with a zest for life. There was a sociopolitical passion to him—like a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, he challenged the domination system of his day. He was a religious ecstatic, a Jewish mystic, for whom God was an experiential reality. As such, Jesus was also a healer. And there seems to have been a spiritual presence around him, like that of St. Francis or the present Dalai Lama. And as a figure of history, Jesus was an ambiguous figure—you could experience him and conclude that he was insane, as his family did, or that he

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *The God of Love Had a Really Bad Week*, CNN Opinion, July 20, 2019

was simply eccentric or that he was a dangerous threat—or you could conclude that he was filled with the spirit of God.²

This Jesus is the mysterious Word, present before the beginning of creation, calling all to compassion, and who welcomes little ones.

And this is the Jesus who is referred to in v. 6, where it says: *“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, **just as you were taught**, abounding in thanksgiving.”*

So, then, how do 21st century followers of Jesus (like us) *continue to live our lives in him ... just as **we** were taught, abounding in thanksgiving?*

Think if it this way:

The twentieth-century English mystic Caryl Houselander (1901–1954) describes how an ordinary underground train journey in London transformed into a vision that changed her life. I share Houselander’s description of this startling experience because it poignantly demonstrates what I call the *Christ Mystery*, the indwelling of the Divine Presence in everyone and everything since the beginning of time as we know it:

All sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging—workers of every description going home at the end of the day. Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but as vividly as a wonderful picture, Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them—but because He was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too . . . all those people who had lived in the past, and all those yet to come.

I came out into the street and walked for a long time in the crowds. It was the same here, on every side, in every passer-by, everywhere—Christ.

² Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, Harper/San Francisco, 2006, p. 164.

I had long been haunted by the Russian conception of the humiliated Christ, the lame Christ limping through Russia, begging His bread; the Christ who, all through the ages, might return to the earth and come even to sinners to win their compassion by His need. Now, in the flash of a second, I knew that this dream is a fact . . . Christ in [humankind]. . . .

I saw too the reverence that everyone must have for a sinner; instead of condoning his [or her] sin, which is in reality [their] utmost sorrow, one must comfort Christ who is suffering in [them]. And this reverence must be paid even to those sinners whose souls seem to be dead, because it is Christ, who is the life of the soul, who is dead in them; they are His tombs, and Christ in the tomb is potentially the risen Christ. . . .

Christ is everywhere; in Him every kind of life has a meaning and has an influence on every other kind of life. . . . Realization of our oneness in Christ is the only cure for human loneliness. For me, too, it is the only ultimate meaning of life, the only thing that gives meaning and purpose to every life.

After a few days the “vision” faded. People looked the same again, there was no longer the same shock of insight for me each time I was face to face with another human being. Christ was hidden again; indeed, through the years to come I would have to seek for Him, and usually I would find Him in others—and still more in myself—only through a deliberate and blind act of faith.³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said a similar thing in a different context: *We live by responding to the word of God . . . since this word is addressed to our entire life, the response, too, can only be an entire one; it must be given with our entire life as it is realized in all our several actions.⁴*

Recall that in 1865, Abraham Lincoln ruminated on how Americans (who had suffered through four years of Civil War and nearly 700,000 dead) *had read the same Bible and prayed to the same God.*

³ Caryll Houselander, *A Rocking-Horse Catholic* (Sheed and Ward: 1955), 137-140.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (Touchstone: 1995, ©1955), 219.

Or did they?

In the 1840s and 1850s, major denominations split over the issue of slavery and a deeper political crisis bound up with different visions of God: *the God of the Master versus the God of Love*. All theologies might come from the same Bible, but they *were not then and are not now* equally true.

Friends, even as trends point to the decline of religion, Americans are still living with this theological argument -- one playing out among Christians of mostly European descent. This argument shapes our politics, its dogma ... and offered up in pulpits across the land. This is an ancient conflict that never quite seems to go away. For whatever reason, *western Christianity has a hard time sticking with a God of love*.

But, as a minority of white Christians know, and the majority of Christians of color never need be reminded, *the God of love is always hanging around*, the brown-skinned Jewish rabbi preaching about the poor being blessed and the broken-hearted comforted. Love your neighbor as yourself. Do unto others. Let the little children come. Faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love.