

Gold Medals and God Goggles

What a week! Learning, playing, laughing, singing, and praying with 113 children and 50 staff and volunteers means that Vacation Bible School will go down as one the highlights of the summer, and honestly, the year. As you know our theme for this year's VBS was the Olympics. The children were athletes, and the staff and volunteers were the coaches and officials. Different age groups represented different continents and waved flags from multiple countries as they entered Davis Hall on Monday morning. Everyone cheered for everyone else. And everyone got a gold medal in the end. I confess that I have grown a bit jaded about the other Olympics in recent years. The scandals, the controversies, the pettiness, and the marketing have led to my being cynical about the power of two weeks of competition to make a real difference in a world that is beyond tattered. Thanks to VBS, I am now looking forward to the Olympics in Paris later this summer. Not everyone will get a gold medal, of course, but for two weeks, by the grace of God the world will largely set aside our divisions and hostility and cheer each other on.

That is the turn I hear Paul making in our text this morning. Over the course of what scholars believe are portions of multiple letters, Paul has spent the first few chapters making a case for his ministry, insisting that he and Timothy are not losing heart—cracked clay pots though they may be. He has argued for the power of God being made visible through the dings and cracks in his human form and now he gets to the “so what” part. He insists that the love of Christ urges Timothy and him, and—by extension all of us on. Perhaps being surrounded by the cheering voices of my VBS friends led me to imagine the love of Christ as a character in the stands cheering me and everyone on, maybe with a pompom or even a bullhorn. Then I came across a scholar who offered a different translation: “Christ’s love ‘holds together’ all that believers do.”¹ Christ’s love does more than cheer us on from a distance then. Eugene Teselle understands Paul to be saying that the love of

¹ Eugene Teselle, “Proper 6, 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (11-13), 14-17, Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3* (Westminster: Louisville, 2009) 136.

Christ acts more like a mother hen or a coach or a border collie as this love gathers us up, holds us close, and drives us forward. I saw this kind of love in action this past week as I watched faithful youth and adults count heads and count again and swoop in and around to make sure that not one child wandered off, that not one child got left behind. That is what the love of Christ looks like according to Paul. Christ's love is never stuck in the stands, but rather with us, holding us, rounding us up, and leading us into life. Out of that persistent and abundant love for us, Jesus Christ gave himself, gave his very life for us, and for all...for All so that not one person would be lost or left behind.

This recognition, this insight is a game changer. For if we in fact believe (like we talked and sang about this week) that I am created in God's own image, that you are created in God's own image, that we are created in God's own image, and that they—whoever they may be—are also created in God's own image, AND if we believe as Paul does that the love of Christ is on the move seeking to draw in and redeem every last person, then we can no longer look at anyone or anything in the same way, from a human point of view. That's the "so what" piece. With Paul we are compelled—urged, driven to see everyone as God does, as beloved and precious and worthy of redemption, as part of God's new creation. And we are urged not only to see the new creation being born among and in us, we are called to join in pointing out this new creation to others, too. We are called not only to see others the way Christ does but also to help others see the new creation as well.

Well, that's easy. Glad it's all settled. Time to head to brunch.

Except that it's not that easy, is it? As we watch footage of bombs obliterating hospitals where innocents and hostage-takers are huddling together and waves of water washing over the streets of Miami with no hurricane in sight and leaders at every level playing games with the lives and livelihoods of real human beings, we can easily grow skeptical that anything good can be made of the mess we're in. It can be hard to take Paul at his word. And yet God has always been about re-creating rather than scrapping everything and everyone and starting over with a clean slate—even the story of the flood includes an ark, a bunch of animals, and Noah and his family. As my friend and colleague Jessica Tate points out:

In both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic hope God doesn't just save souls; God renews the world.

Therefore, 'the meaning is not that the individual becomes a person while the world remains unchanged. Nor is the meaning psychological, as though the world remains the same but for those who have come to faith, "everything looks different." Paul means the statement objectively. In the Christ event something happened to the world (to everything), not just to individual souls.²

In Christ something happened and is still happening. I wonder if it is *this* realization that shifts how we look at the world. Maybe remembering that the God we meet in Jesus Christ is not intent on destroying the earth and all who live in it, maybe finding a way to trust that God is at work even now making things new—ALL things, including us and everyone else and everything else—can shift how we view those things. Maybe.

One of the children who joined us this week was wearing a pair of pink iridescent heart-shaped sunglasses around campus, and she was not simply smiling but beaming, at least when I crossed her path. I started to wonder if I should trade my trifocals for some of those. Maybe then I could see the world a bit differently. Paul is not naïve, nor does he expect us to be. It is not a matter of viewing the world through heart-shaped rose-colored glasses. No, God's way of seeing is beyond anything we can fully grasp, and yet Paul is determined to look at everyone and everything through God's eyes, through the lens of Jesus Christ as best he can. He does his best to don what might be thought of as God goggles, to try and see as God sees. Paul is convinced that such a vision is possible because of Jesus Christ; the goggles have Christ shaped lenses it seems. Christ died for all, so all are made new. Caught up in and propelled by the love of Christ, Paul is convinced that he can in fact see new creation at every turn, and he fully expects that the church, the body of Christ to do the same: to look for and see new creation around every corner and in every person and to help others see that new creation, too.

I'm not sure that is the work the larger church has been best known for recently. Some of our siblings in Christ are determined to bar people who look like me from a role like mine, to shut out those who raise

² Boring, Eugene and Fred Craddock. *The People's New Testament Commentary*. Louisville: WJK, 2004, p. 559

questions or to shun those push back on the ways the larger church has wielded its influence to protect the powerful and trounce the least of these. Others are convinced that there are some who are only sort of made in God's image—if they change how they look or who they love or where they live or what they believe or do not believe. These are the church stories the larger world sees, and yet you and I know—or at least suspect—that those stories are not the whole story. At our faithful best, the body of Christ is not marked by fear but by faith, not defined by our exclusion of some but by our inclusion of everyone Christ does. Out of love for all, Christ died for all, Paul reminds us. It's not a gold medal; it is far, far, far better.

Three years ago, we began a new adventure together when I stepped into this pulpit for the first time as your pastor, and in those three years you have helped me look for and see God's new creation. Together we have welcomed new faces and welcomed back familiar ones. We have partnered with new ministries such as Love Feast on the Streets and Second Course. We have wept over the crisis in Haiti and persisted in raising funds to continue partnering with our beloved friends there. We have hammered for Habitat and walked in CROP Walks. We've sported hair nets and danced while filling meal kits for Rise Against Hunger. We have been to Narnia, to Jerusalem, and to the Olympics with the youngest among us. We have stared down the starkness of a stripped chancel on Good Friday and rejoiced as signs of resurrection life were carried back in by our children and youth on Easter morning. We have played and served and prayed and learned together, and we have worshiped, wept, and wondered together, too. And by the grace of God, we will continue to play and serve and learn and pray and worship and weep and wonder together for years to come. As we begin this fourth year together, it is my prayer that we will commit ourselves anew to basking in the grace and love poured out on us and on all in Jesus Christ. And then I'm hoping we will put our God goggles on—or back on, not simply to look for and see God's new creation for ourselves but to help others look for and see that new creation, too, even as we are urged on and bound up together in the love of Christ, now and forever.

Alleluia! Amen.