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Colossians 1:15-20

6th Message

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THE FATHER'S PLEASURE

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH

I have an unusual challenge today: to preach on the same text that John preached on just two weeks ago, Colossians 1:15-20. The task he has assigned me is “to help fill in our understanding of the theology of Christ.” As we approach this text, Paul has just told the Colossian Christians that they have cause for joy and thanksgiving to God the Father because of what he has done:

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:13-14 ESV)

Paul now goes on to describe this beloved Son in some of the most exalted language of the New Testament:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col 1:15-20)

Not only is the language of this paragraph beautiful, but so is its structure. This structure, which is especially discernible in Greek, still comes across in a more formal translation like the *ESV*. The paragraph has two sections, each in turn containing two sub-sections, arranged in a chiasmic pattern:

- a He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (15-16)
- b And he is before all things (17)
- b' And he is the head of the body (18a)
- a' He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead (18b-20)

The first half presents the Son as preeminent in the first creation, the second half as preeminent in the new creation. This is the Father's beloved Son, the one in whom he is well-pleased.

Preeminent in the First Creation (1:15-17)

This beloved Son is the image of the invisible God. In the first creation God the invisible made himself visible in the world in the form of the humans whom he created as the final climactic act of his creative activities. He created these humans, male and female, in his own image (Gen 1:26-27). They were to represent him on earth, ruling over the creatures of sea, sky and land on his behalf. They were his vice-regents, his presence in the world. They were also the image in his temple, for the cosmos is the temple that God made with the garden as its sanctuary, its Holy of Holies. Here in the sanctuary he placed not an image made of stone or wood, but a living image, a human being in his own image.

But that image became flawed. The first humanity failed to faithfully represent God in the world. They failed to rule themselves, let alone rule the other creatures. They failed to guard the sanctuary, and so the image was cast out of the sanctuary. Ever since, there has been a need for a new image, a new representation of God in the world, one who would faithfully represent God in the world, one who would make the invisible God visible.

God didn't make another creature in his image to be his image-bearer in the world. Instead, he sent his own Son into the world to be not just in his image but the very image itself. He sent his Son into the world to be the new human, to be incarnate, that is, to be embodied as a human. Though he was in the form of God the Son took on the form of a servant, becoming in the likeness of man (Phil 2:6-7). And what a better human he is! The first man, the first Adam, was from the earth; the second man, the second Adam, is from heaven, the heavenly man (1 Cor 15:45). He is not just better; he is the perfect representation of God, the perfect image: “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb 1:2). The Son is a far better image of God than the first humans were. He is the exact representation of God's very essence. As the man from heaven he is the true man. As the heavenly man he can join heaven and earth together. And though he has now returned to heaven he has not laid aside his humanity.

Next Paul says that this Son is “the firstborn of all creation.” But surely this Son is not himself begotten! The next verse makes it very clear that the Son is not part of creation; in the fundamental divide between creator and creation he is on the creator side. He is the one in, through and for whom the creation is made. Therefore, when Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, started preaching that “there was a time when the Son was not,” the church got very alarmed. This was the theological controversy which led to the first church council in 325. This Council of Nicea condemned Arius and his Arian heresy, declaring that there never was a time when the Son was not. Yet the Son is still begotten, as we affirm in the Nicene Creed which is the product of the first two church councils:

We believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

The Father has always had a Son; the Son has always had a Father. Being eternally begotten of the Father, he is the firstborn. The significance of being the firstborn is that the firstborn is the Father's heir.

Jesus told a parable about a man who planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants. He sent a series of servants to collect the rent, but the tenants beat or even killed each one. Finally the Father sent his one remaining, his beloved Son. The tenants recognized him as the heir, but wanted the inheritance for themselves, so they killed him (Mark 12:1-13). Jesus is that heir, heir to the Father's kingdom.

Verse 16 shows why the Son is the firstborn, the heir: “For by [in] him all things were created ...all things through him and for him have been created.” All things were created and have been created. These are divine passives, where God is the unspoken subject. But the Son is intimately involved with the Father in creation, for it is in him, through him and for him that all things have been created. The Son is both the sphere in which, and the agent through which, creation took place. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1). But John goes back beyond even that; in the beginning the Word was already there, before the beginning began:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1-3)

Also there in the beginning was the spirit of God hovering over the waters ready to execute God’s creative work (Gen 1:2). When God created the cosmos he did so through the Son and the Spirit, whom Irenaeus, the second-century church father, called God’s two hands. God spoke the world into existence through his word, though his ten words (“Then he said” occurs ten times in Gen 1).

God not only created all things through his Son, he also created them for his Son, because the Son, as firstborn, is the heir. This surely implies the Father’s great pleasure in his Son. God was pleased with the creation that he made, seven times gazing on it and declaring it good, even very good. How much greater, then, the pleasure that he has in his Son for whom he made this world.

The Son is the Father’s only-begotten, his beloved, his firstborn. The Fourth Gospel makes it clear that the engine driving everything is the love between the Father and the Son. The Father loves the Son; the Son loves the Father and does his pleasure. They bask in shared glory, and have done so since before the beginning. Also there before the beginning was the Spirit. The church fathers devoted much attention to the relationship within the Godhead, recognizing it as fundamental to the world. God is love. Love has three components: the lover, the beloved, and the love itself. Augustine identified the Father as the lover, the Son as the beloved, and the Spirit as the mutual love flowing between Father and Son. The three persons of the Trinity coinhere: they are mutually involved in each other while yet remaining distinct. At the heart of their relationship lies love: the Father’s love for the Son and the Son’s love for the Father. From this love flows all else.

The Son is central not just to the establishment of the cosmos but also to its sustenance, its ongoing functioning: “he is before all things and in him all things hold together” (1:17). As we read elsewhere, “he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3).

Preeminent in the New Creation (1:18-20)

In verse 18 Paul moves on from the Son’s preeminence in the first creation to his preeminence in the new creation. He is the head of the body, the church. The church is the new creation, those who are in Christ. It is a body with many different parts, each of which contributes to the proper functioning of the body. Over the body, as its head, stands the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as it is in the Son that all creation holds together, so it is in the Son that the church holds together.

Paul now elaborates on this supremacy of the Son in the new creation in verses 18b-20. He is the beginning, the founder of the new humanity, of the new creation. And he is the firstborn from

the dead, the first to pass through death into new life. He was not the first person to be raised from the dead. The Bible records a few others who were raised, notably Lazarus. But they were raised back into their previous life, only to die again. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead was of a wholly different order: not a resurrection back into the same life, but a resurrection through death and out the other side into new life. He was re-embodied but with a transformed body, one that was recognizable yet exhibited significant differences from his previous body.

As firstborn he is the first of many, of those who will join him in the passage through death into new life, into the new creation. He is our pioneer (Heb 2:10; 12:2), the one who has gone before us to blaze the trail so that we might follow.

There is another place where Christ is described as firstborn from the dead. In the greeting at the beginning of Revelation, Jesus Christ is described as “the faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5). This is a three-fold description of the trail which Jesus has blazed for those who follow him. Jesus is the faithful witness: he both faithfully proclaimed the word of God and was himself the faithful word of God. For this faithful witness he was killed by God’s enemies. But death could not hold him: he was dead but is now alive. Moreover, as the one who now holds the keys of Death and Hades (Rev 1:18), he is able to set free from death those who follow him there through their faithful witness. Finally, he has been enthroned as King of kings and Lord of lords, sovereign over all other powers. The saints are called to follow Christ on this same path: faithful witness, through death into new life, and exaltation. The Lamb’s army follow him wherever he goes (Rev 14:4).

The resurrection of Christ is a vital point of doctrine. As Paul says, if there be no resurrection then we are the most pitiable of people (1 Cor 15:19). We think of Christ’s resurrection as a miracle, a supernatural event. But the real miracle is that Christ died. As Charles Wesley’s hymn says, “’Tis mystery all, the immortal dies.” How can the immortal die? By God’s grace Jesus tasted death for us (Heb 2:9). In Christ’s death, innocent blood had been shed. But Death and Hades had no claim to him. Christ burst their gates asunder and rose triumphant from the grave. Justice was done! But then what grace! God declared that this Son, risen from the dead, would be the first-fruits. Many would follow him through death into life. When we are united to Christ in faith, we pass from death to life. This is what our baptism represents, sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ by dying to our old self and rising to our new self. And there still awaits us a resurrection of the body, when we will receive new bodies of which Jesus’ resurrection body is the prototype.

The Son is firstborn from the dead so that he might be supreme in all things. His resurrection was followed by his ascension back to heaven, where God seated him at his right hand, enthroned as King and named Lord. Already supreme in the first creation he is now supreme in the new creation. Next Paul backs this up with an explanation for the supremacy: this was according to the pleasure of God the Father. God was pleased. He was pleased to do two things in and through the Son.

Firstly, God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in the Son. In the first creation God was intermittently present on earth in the garden; here he strolled in the cool of the day. But primarily his presence was represented by the first man and woman, whom he appointed as guardians of the sanctuary and rulers over his creation.

Later, after he chose Abraham and his seed to be a new humanity, after he delivered and ransomed that seed from Egypt, he promised that he would choose a place to put his name in order to dwell there (Deut 12:5, etc). Jerusalem was this place, simultaneously the City of David and the City of God, the city of the earthly king and the city of the heavenly King. Here God was pleased to dwell (Ps 68:17). Here his temple was built, which he filled with his glory. Later Jewish tradition called this indwelling glory the *shekinah*, a word that means indwelling. But due to the persistent sin of his people, God removed his glory and allowed the temple to be destroyed. We hear no more of God's *shekinah* glory until the opening verses of John's gospel:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Read against the backdrop of the Old Testament, this verse is packed with significance. The Son became embodied and tabernacled among humanity, filled with divine glory. Those who looked on Jesus saw the divine glory. God had restored his *shekinah* glory to earth, not in a building but in a person; not just any person, but in his Son. God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in his Son, so that when that Son was present on earth God and his glory were visible:

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:18 NIV)

This one and only Son, this only-begotten, is himself God and is in the very bosom of the Father, his bosom friend. He has exegeted the Father, he has made him known in the world. So when we look on the Son we look on the heart of the Father.

Twice in the gospels we hear the Father express his pleasure in the Son in whom he was pleased to dwell on earth. Immediately after Jesus' baptism, as he came up from the water, the heavens were split open, the Spirit of God descended like a dove on Jesus, and a voice from heaven declared, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17; cf. Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). Later, on the mount of Transfiguration, Jesus and his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, were overshadowed by a bright cloud, the cloud which in the Old Testament represented God's glory. A voice from the cloud made the same declaration: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 17:5; cf. Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35; 2 Pet 1:7).

Jesus was able to do what he did because the Father took great pleasure in the Son, and the Son took great pleasure in doing the Father's will. Jesus played the role of the servant seen by Isaiah in the first of his Servant Songs: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight" (Isa 42:1). Matthew cites Jesus as the fulfillment of this text (Matt 12:18). A good servant delights to do his master's will; a good master delights in his willing servant. How much more so when the servant is the Father's beloved Son. The Father and Son delighted in each other. The Father delighted to have all his fullness dwell in his Son, incarnate on earth.

The second aspect of the Father's delight in the Son was to use him as the instrument of reconciliation. He was pleased through him to reconcile all things unto himself, pacifying them through the blood of the cross. Pacification is not necessarily received willingly. There are those who willingly submit to God's pacification in Christ. We finally abandon our hostility to God and come to Christ, yielding our sovereignty to him. But there are others who will be pacified

involuntarily at the end. They will bow the knee and acknowledge Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords. God is in the process of submitting all things to Christ, placing them under his feet. Better to acknowledge his lordship willingly now than be made to do it at the end of time. In the end, God will reconcile all things to himself through his Son. He will make his Son's kingdom universal. When every knee is bowed then the Son will have received his inheritance.

God's Pleasure in his Son and his sons

Before the beginning the Father and the Son basked in each other's pleasure, in love mediated by the Spirit. In the beginning the Father was pleased to use the Son and the Spirit as his two hands, creating all things in, through and for his beloved Son whom he appointed as heir of all things. In the incarnation God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell bodily in his Son on earth, beaming with pleasure upon him at his baptism and his transfiguration. God was pleased that this Son be firstborn from the dead, heir to a new creation, and pleased that he be the agent and means of reconciliation.

And God extends that pleasure to us, as shown by the verses immediately before and after this paragraph. In the preceding verses, Paul has told the Colossian Christians that God has transferred them from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved Son, the kingdom over which God has appointed him as heir as firstborn from the dead. The Father has qualified them to a share in the inheritance of the saints in light. When we are in Christ, we receive a share in his inheritance. And just as the Father beams with pleasure on his beloved Son, so he beams with pleasure on those who are in the kingdom of his beloved Son.

But there is more. In the immediately following verses Paul says that the Colossians have been reconciled, turned from enmity, "in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him" (1:22). God's goal is to conform us to the humanity of Jesus, humanity that faithfully images God. We are being transformed into the image of God in Christ.

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor 15:47-49)

The Father already takes pleasure in us because he's transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. His pleasure will be greater still when he has conformed us to his image perfectly portrayed in his beloved Son.

The story begins with the triune God as a community of perfect love; it ends with God drawing his people into that communion of love. It begins with God in eternal glory. It ends with God and his people in eternal glory. At the center stands God's beloved Son, incarnate as Jesus the Christ, on whom he periodically shone the radiance of his glory, declaring, "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased." At the end God will welcome us into his presence, saying, "I will be his God and he will be my son" (Rev 21:7). He will shine the radiance of his glory on us and say, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Yes, women, this includes you, because being a son means being an heir, and in Christ we all, men and women, receive a share in the inheritance.

The love between the Father and the Son, their pleasure in one another mediated by the Spirit, anchors the stories of creation and redemption. God extends that love to us, adopting us as his children:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are... Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:1-2)

Many think that this text in Colossians is an early Christian hymn. One of the most striking things about the early church is its worship of the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ. The first Christians were all Jews staunchly committed to monotheism, to the Shema's declaration that "the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4). Yet throughout the New Testament epistles we see language and titles applied to the risen Christ which are appropriate of God alone. But the church was not being blasphemous. The early church worshiped Jesus Christ alongside God without compromising its monotheism.

And the early church expressed this worship in song, some of which we find in the New Testament. In the book of Revelation every time we see the saints they are singing songs of praise to God and to the Lamb. And so do we. It is the Father's pleasure that we bow before the Son and worship him as Lord and King, as we sang earlier:

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
Every tongue confess him King of glory now;
'Tis the Father's pleasure we should call him Lord,
Who from the beginning was the mighty Word.¹

1. Caroline M. Noel, "At the Name of Jesus," *The Name of Jesus, and Other Names* (1878).

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