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3rd Message

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EMBRACING THE WORLD?

SERIES: EMBRACING RELATIONSHIPS

We have been examining the relationships in which we are involved, under the following rubric:

In light of who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit, who we are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world?

We conclude our series today by looking at the third relationship: who are we in relationship to the world? I have entitled this message “Embracing the World?” Note the question mark. Our relationship with the world is problematic: both individual Christians and the church as an entity over the centuries have had very different thoughts about this relationship. Should we embrace the world, and if so, how? Or should we hold the world at arm’s length? Or should we even turn our back on the world? Our window depicts the three relationships as three pairs of hands. The third pair reaches out to the world. That very design tips my hat as to how I see ourselves in relationship to the world.

What do we mean by “the world”? I am using the word with a double sense, to refer to the physical world and to non-Christian humanity.

I. The Physical World

How should we as God’s people relate to the physical world? Does this world matter? Should we engage with the world? Should we care about the physical world? Am I allowed to enjoy this world? Or should I feel guilty if I do enjoy it? The church has had an uneasy time with these and similar questions. Christians have given very different answers.

The Old Testament is firmly rooted in the physical world, in space and time. The Bible opens with a portrayal of God as Creator. As a master artist or craftsman he fashioned a physical cosmos with careful attention to both form and content. He then stepped back and admired his handiwork, pronouncing it very good. In the middle of this world he planted a garden, filling it with “all kinds of trees... that were pleasing to the eye and good for food” (Gen 2:9). The garden was God’s sanctuary on earth, a piece of heaven on earth, an intrusion of heaven onto earth. It was the original paradise. Here in paradise God placed the human he had made to enjoy the bounty of his provision. Though mankind subsequently misused the elements of creation, God’s gifts, the fault lay in the user not the elements being used.

God’s redemptive work with Israel unfolded within the tangible, physical earth; it was also firmly rooted in space and time. God promised Abraham that his descendants would have a land. He brought the Israelites out of Egypt in order to bring them into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land that was a partial recreation of the garden of Eden. At Sinai he had the people build him a dwelling place. He filled Bezalel with his Spirit, the first person to be expressly filled with his Spirit. He filled him with wisdom,

understanding, knowledge and all kinds of skills so he could make all the elements of the tabernacle with artistry (Exod 31:2-4). He knew how to work with precious metals: gold, silver and bronze. He knew how to work with precious stones and fine fabrics. He knew how to work with beautiful colors: purple, blue and scarlet. Everything was exquisitely beautiful and lavish. The tabernacle made by Bezalel and his colleagues and assembled by Moses followed exactly the pattern that God had shown Moses atop Mount Sinai. There are echoes of creation in the final assembly and completion of the tabernacle. It was a new creation, this time mediated through Moses. It was a new piece of heaven on earth, a new intrusion of heaven onto earth.

The temple built under Solomon was more beautiful still. Here the Lord was worshiped in beauty, not only the beauty of holiness, but the aesthetic beauty of architecture and music. Music, God’s gift of common grace to all mankind, reached its zenith in the Levitical singing of praise during the daily sacrifices. Metalworking, another gift of common grace, was used for its truest purpose in the manufacture of the furniture for the temple. God prohibited the making of idols but he allowed the spending of enormous resources in both materials and artistic skill on the tabernacle and temple.

The Holy of Holies, God’s throne room, was the epicenter of heaven on earth, the center of a hierarchy of holiness: the Holy of Holies, the Holy Place, the courtyard, the city of Jerusalem, and the land. Each in diminishing degree was holy space. A common theological reality links the garden, the tabernacle, and the temple. Each was God’s sanctuary on earth. Each was a piece of heaven on earth, an intrusion of heaven onto earth.

God’s dealings with Israel were firmly rooted in space and time, in geography and history. God wanted his people to enjoy the bounty of this world in a land flowing with milk and honey. He wanted his people to worship him in beauty. He had rescued his people from harsh labor and put them in “heaven on earth.”

By the time of Jesus the land was far from a land flowing with milk and honey. It was an oppressed land under Roman occupation. The Jews longed for the land to be restored. The land had a beautiful temple: Herod’s temple was described as one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. The Babylonian Talmud states, “He who has not seen the temple of Herod has not seen a beautiful building.” As the disciples were leaving the temple one day they said to Jesus, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” (Mark 13:1). But Jesus was not impressed. He was grieved and warned of the impending judgment on the temple. It may have been the most beautiful building in the world but it was no longer God’s dwelling place on earth. It was a den of rebels rather than a piece of heaven on earth. But heaven was on earth—in Jesus: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling [tabernacled] among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Beauty and glory were now

most evident in Jesus. He was heaven on earth; he was the temple, albeit a movable one.

It is now the church that is the temple. We are God's handiwork, his poem (*poiema*) (Eph 2:10). We are put together in Christ as individual building blocks to become a holy temple in the Lord, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph 2:21-22). God is still at work in space and time, but his kingdom is no longer tied to a particular geography. There is no longer holy space. Wherever God's people are, there is heaven on earth. But does this mean that the world doesn't matter any more?

A sad thing happened early in church history. As Hellenistic influence came to predominate over Jewish influence, the church's attitude to the material world changed. Gnosticism and neoplatonism taught that the material world was inferior, nay evil. This led to the exaltation of virginity, of celibacy, of singleness. It led to a suspicion of pleasure. It produced asceticism, a rejection of material pleasures and even necessities. And it produced a deep misunderstanding of spiritual geography, especially of the relationship between heaven and earth. I'll examine these in turn: first, the relationship between heaven and earth, and secondly, the idea of pleasure.

1.1 Heaven and Earth

A popular chorus in my youth was:

This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through,
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.¹

This is a very common mindset: the earth is no longer our home; we're just passing through on our way to heaven. This mindset has been common within the church since very early days. The spiritual geography of the Jews was rooted in physical geography, in this world. The earliest Christians, as Jews, would have maintained this robust geography. But Hellenistic thought had a very different attitude to the relationship between heaven and earth. Neoplatonism taught that the soul was imprisoned in an earthly body from which it needed to be freed. But this was a profound misunderstanding of the relationship between heaven and earth.

Paul told the Philippian Christians, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil 1:27); the word he used for "conduct yourselves" means to live as a citizen. These Christians lived in Philippi but that was not their citizenship. Further on Paul says, "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20). This was language they understood, for Philippi was a Roman colony; those who lived there had Roman citizenship. If the Philippian Christians had their citizenship in heaven but were living in Philippi it meant they were a colony of heaven. I find this a very helpful way of understanding the church: we are a colony of heaven on earth, an intrusion of heaven onto earth.

There is much misunderstanding of this idea of our citizenship being in heaven. Many people think of it in terms of that chorus, "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through." At death we will go to our true home. But that's not how a colony works. The goal of a colony isn't to withdraw the colony back to the homeland, but to extend the influence of the homeland into the colonized territory.

Here we have a misunderstanding about death. What happens when we die? Our personhood continues in a disembodied state. We are forever with the Lord. But that's not the end state. If it is then

death is victory because it has freed us from the shackles of this earth where we don't belong, through which we are just a-passing. But the Bible affirms very strongly that death is wrong. In the end, death, the last enemy, will be destroyed. How so? In resurrection. In the creed we affirm, I believe in the resurrection of the dead. We will be re-embodied. Not back into this world as it is now, but into a world that has been transformed, a world that has been completely infused with heaven. The end of the story is a new heavens and a new earth. Revelation envisions it as the garden city, the New Jerusalem and paradise combined together. The end is a full intrusion of heaven onto earth not a full withdrawal from earth. Even the media are taking notice: in April *Time* magazine devoted a cover story entitled "Rethinking Heaven" to this matter.²

I have no way of conceiving such a world, a world filled with heaven. We have one pattern of such a resurrection: the resurrection of Jesus. He received his resurrection body in the middle of time. It was a tangible physical body, but in a way none of us has ever yet experienced. It could do things we're not used to a human body doing. A similar resurrection awaits us all. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is an affirmation of the physicality of God's world and of his commitment to his world.

And so we sing,

This is my Father's world,
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.
This is my Father's world:
The battle is not done;
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and heav'n be one.³

Maltbie Babcock understood the end: that "earth and heaven be one."

Does this world matter? If this world doesn't matter then death is victory, because it releases the imprisoned soul from the confines of this physical, material world. This has been a common view throughout church history. But this is much closer to Buddhism: Nirvana is release from the confines of this physical world.

1.2 Pleasure

Our understanding of the relationship between heaven and earth, and our understanding of pleasure are interrelated. If we think that we're just a-passing through, then we will feel guilty about pleasure. But if we see that God has deliberately placed us on this earth to extend heaven, then we can take a more earthy view of pleasure. Pleasure is God's gift, it's his creation.

Yesterday I went to see Max Maclean perform *The Screwtape Letters* in San Jose. In one of his letters to his nephew Wormwood, Screwtape advises about pleasure:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula.⁴

C. S. Lewis knew the human heart very well. God has made us as creatures of desire, with the capacity to feel pleasure, and he wants us to feel pleasure. Desire is not necessarily evil. Again it's Buddhism that wants to give up desire. God wants us to have deep desires, but he wants them to be satisfied in the right way. I have been helped by Jeremiah Burroughs, a puritan pastor, and his book *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, which I've had many of you have read. He says that a Christian is content yet unsatisfied:

"he is the most contented man in the world, and yet the most unsatisfied man in the world... A little in the world will content a Christian for his passage, but all the world, and ten thousand times more, will not content a Christian for his portion."§

John Piper is fond of saying that "God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in him." Because we find our contentment in God and in Christ we are free to enjoy this world without looking to it to give us contentment. We are free to enjoy the world for our passage without looking to it for our portion. So it is Christians who really ought to have the deepest pleasure.

How do we think of ourselves in relationship to the physical world? We affirm God as Creator: this is still the world he has made. His vision for humanity was to be vicegerent, stewarding the world as his regent. We are free to engage in art and music as redeemed people, using redeemed imaginations. We can use these aesthetic gifts to beautify and to celebrate life. We can celebrate the art that is now hanging on the walls of the auditorium, and this beautiful window behind me. There are dangers: we can become self-absorbed; we can misuse art, music and literature. But as humans who not only have been made by God, but redeemed by Christ and filled with his Spirit, who better to engage in music and art that is pleasing to God? Only the Christian is really free to enjoy this earth, celebrating it as God's creation, while accepting the bounds he sets for enjoying it.

2. Non-Christians

Secondly, who are we in relationship to non-Christians, to humanity that lies outside God's kingdom? Should we view them only as potential scalps? Should our only concern be to get them saved? Should we view them as a threat, as unsafe, as inferior, as evil? There has been a deep suspicion of the social gospel, of attempts to fight injustice, of caring for anything more than people's salvation. Our attitude to non-Christians depends upon how we view the relationship between heaven and earth. If the earth is headed for destruction then the only thing that matters is getting people their exit visa, their ticket out of the world. But the Bible portrays a more positive picture of our engagement with the world.

Our Scripture reading was the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Luke sets up the story:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25-28)

In reply Jesus told the story we know so well. A man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked, robbed, beaten, stripped, and left half-dead. Three other men encountered him. Each came to the same place, but for each it was a different place. Each saw the same man in the same condition, but each saw a different man because each looked through different eyes. The priest was "going down the same road" and passed by on the other side. The Levite "came to the place" but also passed by on the other side. Both saw the man as a danger: he was unsafe, a threat to their purity. They saw the man as a liability, and so they excluded him. But the Samaritan "came where the man was." He had no way of identifying the man: he was naked and unconscious, so he couldn't be placed by clothing or accent. The man was simply there. The Samaritan took pity on him and helped him at cost to himself. He saw the man as an opportunity to show mercy, and so he embraced him.

After concluding the story Jesus asked,

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:36-37)

The man who asked the question is described as an expert in the law. He knew Torah, Israel's law. He knew who he was in relationship to God and to his neighbor, and what was expected of him: love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. But he wanted to limit his responsibility to his neighbor, to restrict the range of his neighbor. This implies that he viewed the command to love his neighbor as a liability not an opportunity, as a draining obligation rather than a life-giving gift. But he had no trouble perceiving the point of Jesus' story. The neighbor was the one who was there. The neighbor was the one who showed mercy to the one who was there. Jesus urged him, "Go and do likewise."

If we understand ourselves as a colony of heaven on earth, then we will view our neighbor as an opportunity not a liability. Sadly too often the church views the world as a liability, as a danger, as a contaminating influence, rather than as an opportunity to be a conduit of God's mercy and love.

God is a missional God. When he called Abraham his purposes didn't end with Abraham or even with the seed of Abraham. His purpose was for all peoples to be blessed through Abraham and his seed. Likewise Israel was to be a blessing to the world. Israel was to live in such a way that other nations were attracted to her way of life and to her God. God was his own gift to Israel, and Israel was his gift to the other nations. Jesus went around dispensing blessing; as his presence on earth God was pouring his healing work through Jesus to touch those around him: physical healing, social healing, religious healing.

Jesus told his followers, "Whoever believes in me...rivers of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:38). God pours his life through us to touch those around us. God is his own gift to us, and the church, as a colony of heaven on earth, is his gift to the world. The New Testament uses various metaphors for this: the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on a hill (Matt 5:13-16).

We tend to think of the church being missional as sending missionaries to the other side of the world, to those who have not heard. We pray, as we sang: "Let your kingdom come, let your will be done, so that everyone might know your name." But another line of that

same song reads, “May Jesus Christ be known wherever we are.”⁶ My own parents were missionaries who went half-way round the world. But they engaged in far more than simply preaching the gospel. For example, my mother worked with lepers, showing mercy to those who were being passed by.

Since the church is a colony of heaven on earth there is still a geography, a sense of place. God knows where each of his churches is. He wants to use each one as a conduit of blessing in its place. The church should be missional to its own neighborhood. This is difficult for a church like as at PBCC, because we’re not so embedded in our neighborhood. We commute in from miles around. But there are some missional activities. The Kids Club down the street at Collins Elementary School is reaching out to our neighbors. Real Options grew out of immediate local concerns. Beautiful Day reaches out to neighborhoods.

Over the centuries the church has built many hospitals, orphanages, schools. It has engaged in issues of social justice; a great example is William Wilberforce who fought to eradicate the slave trade and then slavery itself. But the church has to be careful not to acquire and use power to fight injustice. If it gets too much power the church is itself dangerous.

The sociologist Rodney Stark wrote in *The Rise of Christianity* about the place of mercy and love within the early church:

classical philosophy regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions—defects of character to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it was contrary to justice... This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues—that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful. Moreover, the corollary that because God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they love one another was something entirely new. Perhaps even more revolutionary was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe to ‘all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor. 1:2). Indeed, love and charity must even extend beyond the Christian community.⁷

In conclusion, what should our attitude be to the world? This world is still God’s world. God is still at work bringing heaven to earth. The end is not the destruction of the earth, otherwise life on earth has no eternal meaning. As a conduit of heaven on earth we are a conduit for God’s love. We can do this because he has redeemed us in Christ, and is at work in us through his Spirit, filling us with love, mercy and compassion so that we can show the same to others.

To conclude the series, who are we in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world? God has adopted into his family as his sons; we are loved and embraced by him, and so we love him. We are adopted together as the people of God; we embrace and love one another as family. We are God’s presence in the world, and so we reach out our hands to the world, offering it love, mercy and grace in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We affirm with the psalmist:

**The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof,
the world and all who dwell therein. (Ps 24:1)**

1. “This World Is Not My Home,” attributed to Albert E. Brumley, 1937.
2. Jon Meacham, “Rethinking Heaven,” *Time* 179.15 (April 26, 2012): 30-36.
3. Maltbie D. Babcock, “This Is My Father’s World” (1901).
4. C. S. Lewis, “Letter 9,” *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 41-42. First published in 1942.
5. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth, 1964), 42-43. First published in 1648.
6. Bob Kauflin, “Let Your Kingdom Come,” *Valley of Vision* (Gaithersburg, Md.: Sovereign Grace Music, 2006).
7. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 212.

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