

Embracing Relationships

Three sermons by
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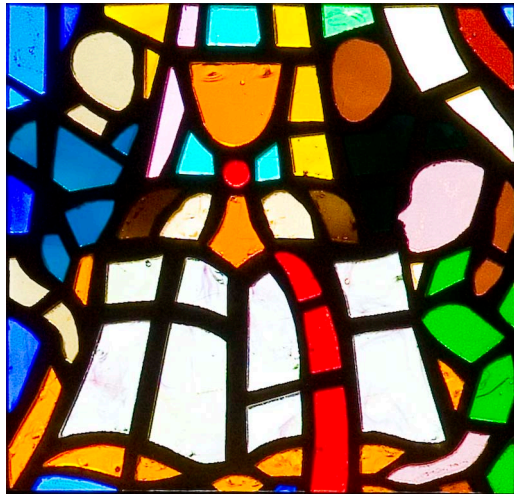
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EMBRACED BY GOD



September is a time of transition, and this year that transition extends to the preaching calendar. Last week John finished his series on Colossians. In October we begin a new series on Luke's gospel. In between we have the month of September. I have been allocated three of the five Sundays. I intend to use these three Sundays to talk about a mission statement. Some of you, no doubt, work for companies that have mission statements. Perhaps some of you have been involved in developing mission statements. Perhaps some of you roll your eyes and think of Dilbert, Scott Adams' comic strip which frequently mocks mission statements. The Dilbert website used to have a mission statement generator, alas now removed.

For many years I have had my own personal mission statement. It provides a framework for how I think about life, the universe, and everything. It governs my teaching and preaching. This is what I seek to do:

To convey who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit; and, as a result, who we are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world.

Firstly, this provides a framework for my own thinking, as I seek to grow in understanding by reading and studying the Scriptures and by contemplation thereon. It then provides a framework for how I seek to instruct others. Whether I am preaching, or teaching a class, or speaking in an informal setting, this is what I am seeking to do.

There are two parts: one about God and one about us. The first part concerns who God is and what he is doing, the second part who we are in relationship to others. Each part is expressed as a triad, as a set of three. Concerning who God is, there is an explicit commitment to a trinitarian understanding of God: who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. Not expressed but implicit is an understanding of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. I deliberately designed the window behind me to depict a trinitarian understanding of God. At the top is the trefoil, a symbol for the Trinity. Depicted in the window are both the Lamb, representing Christ, and the dove, representing the Spirit.

Concerning who we are, we are in relationship beyond ourselves in three different directions. We are in relationship with God. We are in relationship with one another, by which I mean our brothers and sisters in God's family. And we are in relationship with the world, where I am using "world" in the double sense in which it is often used in the New Testament: the physical world as a whole, and humanity outside God's family. These three relationships are also depicted in the window, in the form of three pairs of hands. One pair reaches up towards God. A second pair, comprising hands of different colors, reaches out in an embrace of reconciliation. The third pair reaches out to the world. Perhaps these three pairs of hands will be helpful to you as a memory aid.

It may help to make this statement more personal by replacing "we" with "I": who am I in relationship to God, who am I in relation

to you, my Christian brothers and sisters, and who am I in relation to the world. At the center of this circle of relationships is self. Around me are the other members of God's family. Beyond lies the non-Christian world. But though I be at the center of these circles I am not the focus, because I am also in relationship vertically with God. He is the focus.

These two triads are in relationship with one another. Who we understand ourselves to be in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world ought to be determined by who we understand God to be, and how we understand him to be acting, both in the past and in the present. Sadly this is often not the case. Too often our self-understanding and our relationships are driven by other factors. How should we, as individual selves, think about God, think about God's people, and think about the world? These are the three topics I will explore in these three weeks.

Today's topic is "how should we think about God?" In light of who God is, what he has done, and is doing, who am I, who are we, in relationship to him? Who is God? What does that little word "God" conjure up in your mind? A.W. Tozer opens his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, with this arresting statement: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."¹

There are two other closely related questions. What do you think about yourself? And what do you think God thinks about you? Thinking about God inevitably involves thinking about self. How I see myself and how I see God are interrelated. Knowing God and knowing self are interrelated. Long ago Augustine prayed, "God... let me know myself, let me know Thee."² A thousand years later John Calvin began his *Institutes* with reference to this double knowledge, this interrelated knowledge of self and of God:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern... [T]he knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.³

True knowledge of self should drive us to seek and find God. But we can't come to true self-knowledge until we have found God. And when we find God we find that in reality he has found us. When we come to know God we find that in fact we are known by God. It is only when we find God and know that we are known by God that we have the courage, safety, and security to really know ourselves.

What does it mean to know God? Many languages use two different words for "know," designating two types of knowledge: mental knowledge of a fact, and experiential knowledge of a person. English is the weaker for not differentiating these. The knowledge of God I am interested in is not knowledge of God as a fact but knowledge of God as a person. This is an idea deeply rooted in Scripture, for the

Biblical idea of knowledge implies much more than merely knowing a fact.

Who is God? The fourth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is God?” The answer: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” That is a conventional theological answer, but it is easy for such an answer to remain in the intellectual realm. I am more interested in the knowledge of God that is relational. Such knowledge of God should transform my knowledge of self, which in turn should transform my self. So, what sort of knowledge of God is likely to transform my character?

Today I want to say three things about God. The first two concern who God is: God is God, and God is Love. The third concerns what God has done in Christ and is doing through his Spirit: he is pursuing a narrative.

I. God is God

Firstly, God is God. There’s a hymn that starts, “Great God of wonders, all thy ways are matchless, godlike and divine.” But to say that God’s ways are godlike and divine doesn’t get us very far! Nevertheless, it is important to state that God is God, not so much because of what it tells me about God but because of what it tells me about myself. God being God means that I am not God. This is very obvious, yet we so often act as if we be God.

It has been aptly said that in the beginning God made man in his image and man has been returning the compliment ever since. God critiqued the wicked in Israel, “you thought I was exactly like you” (Ps 50:21). We may acknowledge that God is God, but our actions betray us.

We give our devotion to what we have created rather than to the one who has created us. More subtly, we align God to ourselves rather than aligning ourselves to God. We are preoccupied with self, isolated in self-absorption. In these and many more ways we put ourselves at the center of the universe. Self is the great enemy of a healthy view of God. Self wants to be God. But God never made ourselves to be God. He did not create us with that capacity.

The psalmist urges us, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4 ESV). Douglas Carey writes, “The path to true self-fulfillment does not lie in a preoccupation with self but in selfless preoccupation with God. When the psalmist sets his heart on God, God reciprocates by making him truly fulfilled.”⁴ It is because God is God that he is great enough for us to be preoccupied with.

Self-forgetfulness is the path to freedom. Self gets in the way of my relationships with God and with people. Healthy relationships require the deposition of self. Self-forgetfulness enables me to reach out beyond myself, giving myself rather than being needy. The first one I give myself to is God, accepting that he is God and I am not. More than that, delighting that he is God, and delighting that I am not God.

2. God is Love

A second important thing about God is that he is love. The New Testament states clearly that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). But there was a time when there was only God. How could he be love when

there was no one to love? Love isn’t an abstract character trait. Love is relational: it is given and received. So who did God give his love to, and who received that love, in the beginning if there was only God? There was love in the beginning, because there was relationship within the Godhead in the beginning, or rather, before the beginning. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In the beginning God was already there. Only God was there—that’s part of what it means to be God. The inevitable question is, “What was God doing before the beginning?” He wasn’t preparing Hell for people who ask such questions. Rather, the triune God was basking in mutual love and glory. The Father loved the Son; the Son loved the Father. There are three components to love: the lover, the beloved, and the love itself. God the Father is the lover, giving himself in love to his beloved Son who lies in his bosom. God the Son is the beloved, receiving and accepting the Father’s love, secure in that love, and loving him back. Such is clear from the New Testament, especially John’s gospel. Augustine was perhaps the first to extend the concept and identify the Spirit as the mutual love flowing between Father and Son. This mutual love was glory. As the Father beamed with loving pleasure on his beloved Son, he conferred glory. As the Son accepted and returned the Father’s loving gaze he conferred glory. The triune Godhead dwelt in eternal glory before the beginning.

God knows what it is to be a Father, and he knows what it is to be a Son. He knows what it is to have a beloved Son, and he knows what it is to be the beloved Son. The Bible shows that the primary dynamic within the Godhead is love, and that the pattern for that love is the love between a father and his son. This love is the engine which drives everything.

Knowing this about God has several important implications for how I see myself. The triune God was fully satisfied within himself before the beginning. He had no need of anything else. The theological term for this is *aseity*: God is fulfilled from himself (Lat. *a se*). Nevertheless, he chose to create a cosmos. His *aseity* means that he did so not out of any need, but solely for his good pleasure. At the end of each day he looked on what he had made, and it was good. Like an artist, he stepped back and admired his handiwork. This is very good news for how I view myself. God is not codependent or contingent. He made this cosmos not because he had to but because he wanted to. It’s an expression of his love. He made life because he wanted to. He made human beings because he wanted to. He made me because he wanted to. He liked the world he made; gazing on it with pleasure he saw that it was all very good. This is why he goes to such great lengths to redeem it, to restore it to the state when he can again beam on it with great pleasure. God as Redeemer is predicated on God as Creator; behind both creation and redemption lies God’s love. It is liberating to know that I am made for God’s pleasure. Though I am not needed by God I am wanted by him.

Augustine asked God, “Why do you mean so much to me? ... Why do I mean so much to you?”⁵ We mean so much to God because he has made us in love, he has made us for himself. God can mean so much to us only when we accept that he is God not we ourselves, and accept that he has made us in love.

Who is God? God is God and I am not. God is love and has made this world and me out of his love.

3. God's story

Now the third thing about God: he is at work. God is, but God also acts. What is it that God is doing? He acted in the beginning, creating this world. Though he finished on the seventh day the work which he had done and rested from all the work which he had done, this wasn't the end of his activity. He didn't step into the background after creating the world and let the world run its course. God's purposes for the world were not yet complete. What is God up to?

We have a tendency to incorporate God into our plans, co-opting him into our programs. But this is just another example of how we forget that God is God, of how we exalt self over God. But God is up to something far greater than my comfort or my success. He doesn't promise me life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He isn't at my beck and call. He doesn't promise to "bless America" when summoned to do so at political party conventions.

In May the commencement address at Tufts University was delivered by Eric Greitens, a Rhodes Scholar and former Navy Seal officer. He told the graduating students,

"The more I thought about myself, the weaker I became. The more I recognized that I was serving a purpose larger than myself, the stronger I became."

William Bennett, Secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan, commented about this speech:

Fifty years ago, Greitens' remarks would have been the norm. But through the years, the focus of education, particularly higher education, has shifted from selflessness to self-obsession. Many commencement speakers today tell students to "Dream big" and "Do what you love." It may be feel-good career advice, but it's incomplete life advice. Philosopher Martin Buber wrote, "All education 'worthy' of the name is education of character." Greitens gave the Tufts students an eloquent firsthand example.⁶

"The more I thought about myself, the weaker I became. The more I recognized that I was serving a purpose larger than myself, the stronger I became." When I think about myself, I want God to serve my purposes. But I am part of a story that is much larger than myself, a story in which I am not the center. God invites me to participate in this story.

Our Scripture reading was the parable of the prodigal son from Luke 15, which John read from *The Message* to give added punch. The setting for the parable is given at the beginning of the chapter:

By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story. (Luke 15:1-3, The Message)

Rather, it triggered three similar stories: of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Each story features something that is lost, the zealous effort to find what is lost, and a great celebration when it is found. Jesus told these three stories to shed light on why he was doing what he was doing. He told them to show the Pharisees something about themselves and about God. And he told them in such a way as to challenge the Pharisees to enter the stories themselves, especially the third story of the lost sons.

The same challenge faces us. Do we see ourselves in this story of the lost sons? Do we accept that we were or still are the wayward son who wishes the father dead? Do we accept that we were or still are going our own way in life, self-focused, doing what seems best to us, trying to be God? Have we come to the end of ourselves and realized that we need to come home to the Father? And when we do turn around and decide to come home, do we have our carefully prepared speech, our list of excuses to present to the Father to show why he should take us back? The father wouldn't allow the son to present his excuses and his plan for how to get back into his father's good graces. The son was inexcusable. But the father embraced him and welcomed him back into his family. And he celebrated his return:

"We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!" And they began to have a wonderful time. (Luke 15:23-24)

When the elder son returned home at the end of the day he heard the celebration and stormed off in an angry sulk. The father tried to reason with him,

"Son, you don't understand...this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!" (Luke 15:32)

God loved us so much that he sent his Son, whom he loves even more, to die in our place. He broke the power of sin and death so that we might be free, that we might come home. And then, when we come to Christ, he adopts us into his family as his sons. This obviously doesn't mean just males; females are adopted as well. But the father-son language is used because of all that it entails. We are deeply loved by the Father. Do you know that? I fear that most people don't. Perhaps your own childhood has left you with a negative image of fatherhood. Perhaps you doubt that God has your best interests at heart, that he has kind intentions towards you. In talking with various ones of you it is clear that many do not appreciate fully what it means to be the Father's son.

Since before there were any of us, since before there was any world, God has been a loving Father. He has always had a Son whom he loves. Though he sent that Son to die, he received that Son back into his bosom, into his warm embrace. And then, wonder of wonders, he stretched out his arms to embrace those who had turned their backs on him, those who had run away from him, those who had tried to be God on their own. Adoption as God's sons is a big deal. It is the core of our identity in Christ. This is what God has done in Christ. When we are placed "in Christ," God embraces us as his sons.

But God is up to still more. Though he welcomed us into his embrace while we were yet sinners, he is not content to leave us that way. He is at work in us through his Spirit to conform us to his Son. We were scoundrels. We still are scoundrels. But God is at work to change us. He wants us to be like his Son.

God already looks on us with pleasure. He looks on us with pleasure because he made us, but it is a pleasure tinged with much grief because we turned our back, rejecting the honor of being his children. Because of what he has done in Christ he looks on us with renewed pleasure, adopting us back into his family as his sons. As he continues to be at work in us through his Spirit, transforming us to

be more and more like his Son, he looks on us with ever greater pleasure. But there is more. The day is coming when he will welcome us into his very presence, beam with pleasure on us, and say, “You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” He will welcome us into his glory, looking on us with the approving gaze of a Father on his son. He knows how to gaze this way because he has been doing it since before the beginning.

So, who is God? God is many things. But primarily God is God and God is love. What has he done in Christ and what is he doing through his Spirit? He has adopted us as his sons, and he is transforming us to be like his Son, until the day he will look on us in

pleasure and say, “You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” It is knowing God this way that gives me the freedom, safety, and security to know myself as I really am.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:1-2 NIV)

2012.09.02

1. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperSan-Francisco, 1978 [1961]), 1.
2. Augustine, *Soliloquies*, Book 2, 1.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.1 (ed. J. T. McNeil; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:35.
4. Douglas Carew, “*ānag*,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 3:441, commenting on “delight” in Ps 37:4.
5. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.5 (trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin; London: Penguin, 1961), 24.
6. William J. Bennett, “A Navy SEAL’s wise advice to graduates,” CNN Opinion, May 25, 2012. Online: <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/23/opinion/bennett-navy-seal-speaker/>.

EMBRACING ONE ANOTHER



In this in-between time between two major preaching series I am using three weeks to explore the relationships in which we are involved. I am doing so through the vehicle of what I described two weeks ago as my personal mission statement. This serves as the framework for how I think and work. This is the framework for how I seek to grow in my own understanding, for what I am trying to convey when I teach and preach, and even for how I think through a worship service. Here is what I seek to understand and to convey:

Who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit; and, as a result, who we are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world.

This statement contains two parts: a three-part statement about God and a three-part statement about ourselves, with the second being dependent on the first: what we think about ourselves is dependent on what we think about God. The second part, about ourselves, concerns our relationships. We don't live our lives in isolation, but in relationship to others. As God's people we live out our lives involved in three sets of relationships: with God, with one another, and with the world. These relationships should be lived in light of who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. So we could rephrase the statement:

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

This is not an abstract question: it is not simply a matter of who I see myself as being in these three relationships. The answer should affect my behavior.

These three sets of relationships are depicted by three pairs of hands in the window: hands reaching up to God, hands reaching out to one another in reconciliation, and hands reaching out to the world. Each of these relationships involves embracing another, so I have called this series "Embracing Relationships."

Last time we looked at who we are in relationship to God. We saw two important things about God. God is God and I am not; and God is love, with the paradigm of that love being a father's love for his son, a love into which the Father adopts us. These two truths are both humbling and exalting. It is humbling but also liberating to accept that I am not God. It is exalting to accept that I am the Father's son. Each one of us individually is adopted by God into sonship. I don't use the word "son" to be sexist. Whether we are male or female the Bible uses the language of sonship because in the Biblical framework the son is both the heir and the beloved. Those of you from Asian backgrounds have some understanding of this. In Christ we are each the son of a Father who loves us deeply, who knows what it is to love a son because he has been loving his Son since before the beginning of time.

But we are more than just a collection of individual sons. Together we are a people. Today we move on and look at how we are

to think of ourselves in relationship to one another. We think about this in light of who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit.

1. God and his people

Western society since the renaissance and the enlightenment has been individualistic, and the most individualistic of all societies is the American one. Rugged individualism is part of the national myth. Socialism is a dirty word. American Christianity tends to be individualistic: the gospel is about me and God, about accepting that God has a wonderful plan for my life, and getting my personal ticket to heaven. God cares deeply about me as an individual but God is concerned about so much more. God's primary concerns have always been about a people. His plan concerns a people. The metanarrative into which I am placed in Christ is the story of God and his people.

It is true that the story of this people began with an individual. God chose one person, Abraham, but his purposes stretched far beyond Abraham. God called Abraham to be the father of a great people: "I will make you into a great nation" (Gen 12:2).

This past week the Women's Bible Studies resumed after the summer break, continuing in Exodus. This year you women are studying Exodus 19–40, a portion with two major sections: the covenant (19–24) and the tabernacle (25–40). Both sections mark major advances in the story of God and his people. Having delivered the people of Israel from Egypt, God brought them to himself and announced his intentions:

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exod 19:4-6 NIV)

His intention was that they be a people. He then made a covenant with this people, binding himself to them and them to himself. From now on they were legally his people. The treaty document was the Ten Words, the ten commandments. These commandments fall into two sections: commandments pertaining to God and commandments pertaining to man. The first set of commandments can be observed by an individual: you shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself an image. But the second set imply a people living in relationship one with the other. Honor your father and mother; do not murder; do not commit adultery; and so on. God cared about how his people treated one another. People were in covenant with God, but also in covenant with one another as God's covenant people. It wasn't only how they thought about God that mattered but how they thought about one another, and how they acted towards one another.

Jesus summarized these commandments as “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37-38). God’s people are called to love their neighbors because they are a people. Who are these neighbors? The near neighbors are all those who are in the covenant community. For Israel this was all those who were part of the people of Israel.

Later the prophets critiqued Israel not only for its sins against God, its idolatry, but also for its sins against one another, forgetting that they were a covenant people who were supposed to live in love to one another. They critiqued the wealthy and powerful for oppressing the poor and powerless in the covenant community. It mattered how God’s people lived together.

After binding themselves together in covenant God had his people build him a tabernacle so that he might dwell in their midst (Exod 25:8; 29:45). He was fulfilling his purpose as expressed in his oft-repeated statement, “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” “I will be your God, you will be my people”—that was achieved in the covenant. “I will dwell with you”—this was now achieved with the tabernacle. God’s purpose has always been to create and redeem a people for his presence.

“But that’s all in the Old Testament,” you may say. Aren’t things different in New Testament? No, in the New Testament God is just as concerned to form a people. He has acted in Christ and is continuing to act through his Spirit to bring this about.

2. Made one in Christ

Individual faith is essential. In the Old Testament one was born into the covenant people of God, born into the seed of Abraham. But even in the Old Testament faith was important: there was a faithful remnant within physical Israel. Unfaithful Israelites could be cut off through unbelief, while Gentiles could be included through faith. Throughout his ministry Jesus redrew the lines around himself. The people of God were not those who claimed physical descent from Abraham but those who responded in faith to Jesus’s call to gather around himself. Inclusion in God’s true people has always been by faith, but now the object of our faith is Christ.

At the time of Jesus the Jews saw the world as starkly divided into two groups: an *in* group and an *out* group; the *included* and the *excluded*; Jews who were included in God’s people, and Gentiles who were excluded. God sent his son to the Jews as their Messiah, their Christ. Christ has brought salvation first to the Jew, but then also to the Gentile, because he has demolished the ethnic distinction between Jew and Gentile, as Paul explains to the Ephesians:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Eph 2:13-16)

The people of God are no longer ethnocentric but Christocentric. But the basis of their full participation remains the same: it is still faith, just as Abraham was considered righteous for his faith. It was not easy for the early church to grasp this Christocentric union and

its implications. The Jerusalem church took offense when Peter had a meal with Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his family after their conversion. Later Paul rebuked Peter in Antioch when he withdrew from table fellowship with Gentiles. Paul told the Galatian Christians,

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

In Christ we are joined together regardless of ethnicity, gender or social standing. There are plenty of things that might differentiate us, but there is one overriding thing that unites us: participation in Christ Jesus. The pair of different-colored hands in the window represents this reconciliation and union in Christ. We who were strangers to one another have now been brought together in Christ. As we sang earlier,

Beneath the cross of Jesus
His family is my own—
Once strangers chasing selfish dreams,
Now one through grace alone.¹

The New Testament uses two metaphors to describe our union and participation in Christ. We are a building, each of us being individual building blocks, put together with Christ as the cornerstone. Assembled as this building we are the temple of God, the place where he dwells with his people. Secondly, we are a body, each of us being individual body parts, put together with Christ as the head. Both metaphors express the fact that we are one together, and that we are centered on Christ. Without Christ we fall apart. Without a head the body can’t function. Without a cornerstone the building won’t be true.

This union in Christ incorporates “all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2). It is a people that stretches through time and around the world. Earlier we sang *Holy God We Praise Thy Name*, based on the *Te Deum*, a fourth century Latin poem of praise by the communion of saints to the triune God. It begins *Te Deum laudamus*, “You, O God, we praise.” Who is the *we* that praises God?

all creation worships you...
To you all angels, all the powers of heaven,
the cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise...
The glorious company of apostles praise you.
The noble fellowship of prophets praise you.
The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.
Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you...

As you worship today do you sense that you are part of a people, a people that stretches back centuries and stretches around the world?

One of the great benefits of mission trips is to encounter parts of the family elsewhere in the world, to experience the bonds which we have in Christ. My primary ministry overseas has been in Indonesia, particularly in Timor, working with Eli Fangidae. I count it a great privilege to have known him for nearly 25 years. Eli died on Friday. Today I am torn, because I would like to be in Timor with Eli’s family, with the church he pastored, and with the younger pastors for whom he was a father figure, as they gather for the funeral tomorrow. I know many of these people; we are family together in Christ.

On Tuesday I witnessed a beautiful example of this union in Christ. I had invited Baruch Maoz to speak here last Monday. He is a Jewish Israeli Christian who for over thirty years pastored a church near Tel Aviv. The following day Brian, John, and I had lunch with Baruch. Brian invited Nerses Balabanian to join us; some of you know our dear friend Nerses. He was born in Aleppo, Syria where he still has family. He then lived and ministered in Lebanon before being called here to pastor an Armenian church in San Francisco. Here at the lunch table were an Israeli Jew and someone from Syria and Lebanon. There is great hostility between Israel on the one hand and Syria and Lebanon on the other. But here were these two men embracing one another because they are united in Christ. They share a Christocentric union that overrides all their ethnic differences and tensions.

We must take a thoroughly Christocentric view of our union in Christ. It is too easy to exclude groups or fail to fully embrace them. In Christ former enemies and strangers are brought together. The arena in which I observed this as a child was the divide between leper and non-leper. My parents were missionaries in central Thailand, and both worked with lepers, at a time when leprosy was still greatly feared, and lepers were ostracized. Lepers responded to the gospel and came to faith. For many years there were two churches, the so-called “well” church and the leper church. It was a happy day when eventually the two churches united. But it was not easy to live out this union. A few weeks ago I was talking with my mother and a couple of her former colleagues about this matter. They talked about how lepers and non-lepers met for residential conferences. The non-lepers were willing to meet together with the lepers, but they were unwilling to sleep in the same room, so the lepers slept outside on the verandah. That is a denial of the gospel, a denial of our union in Christ.

It is not easy to preserve this unity in Christ. There is a saying, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity.” Sadly this has been contravened through much of church history. In my homeland of Scotland the Church of Scotland has splintered into numerous small denominations. I was reminded of this again last month when I was in Scotland visiting my family and we were trying to figure out where to go to church when we were all on holiday together. Many of these splits could have been avoided had there been more charity. Scotland is only a small country, too small to have so many similar denominations.

The risen Jesus commended the church in Ephesus for its faithfulness to truth, its success at exposing false teachers. But along the way the church had lost its first love, which I take to mean its love for the brethren, its love for one another.

How do we think of ourselves in relationship to one another? In Christ we are one. We are parts of one body with Christ as the head; we are stones within one building with Christ as the cornerstone. We must think of ourselves as a people, and think of ourselves as gathered around Christ.

3. Spirit-enabling to live together

As a family we are called to live together. But it is not always easy living together. This is where the work of the Spirit comes in. God is at work in us through his Spirit to enable us to live together as a people. I want to highlight two aspects of what God is doing in us

as a people through his Spirit. He is transforming our characters and he is equipping his people with gifts.

3.1 Character transformation

Firstly, God is transforming our characters. Living together is not easy. Just because we are family doesn't mean it is easy to get along. Sue and I are fortunate in that both our families like getting together; we enjoy one another's company. We don't choose our family members. We are born into a family and we generally accept the family we have, but even so not all families get along. But in the Christian family it is often different. Particularly in large churches we self-select into homogenous communities of like people. We gather around ourselves people that we like. But that is not the way it is supposed to be. God gathers all sorts of people into his family. We have to learn to live together. God is at work through his Spirit transforming us so that we are able to live together.

In the New Testament epistles there are many lists of virtues. Probably the best-known is the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Gal 5:22-23 NASB)

These are not abstract virtues that you exhibit on your own. You don't have patience on your own. It is when you are in relationship with someone else that you find out whether or not you have patience. These are virtues that are shown in relationship with others, as we live Spirit-empowered lives together.

Even monks had to learn this. The first monks went off into the Egyptian desert to pursue God in isolation. Benedict tried this approach but then he came to an important understanding: learning to live together in community is essential even to the monastic life.

As a people put together in Christ we have to learn to live together. God is at work in us through his Spirit to transform us and give us the character necessary to live together, to be patient with one another, to think of one another more highly than of ourselves, to be generous with one another, and so on.

3.2 Spiritual Gifts

A second aspect of what God is doing in us through his Spirit is the allocation of spiritual gifts. Though we are all one in Christ Jesus we are not identical. Though God is conforming us into the image of his Son, we are not all the same. We are each different parts within the one body, different stones within the one building. Just as the different parts of a body function in different ways, so God through his Spirit has given each of us different gifts so that we function in different ways. Paul told the church in Corinth,

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Cor 12: 4-7)

After listing some of the gifts he concluded,

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. (1 Cor 12:11)

Paul then draws on the analogy of a body to explain how this works:

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many... But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (1 Cor 12:12-14, 18-20)

But the church in Corinth evidently had trouble accepting this principle. Paul rebuked them using irony: if the foot were upset that it weren't a hand, or the ear that it weren't an eye, how could the body function?

God has so designed this body that we need each other in order to function as a body. Through his Spirit he has given each of us different gifts, so that we all have to use our individual gifts in order to function as a body. This is one reason why the ministry of the saints is so important: it takes all the saints, each with their Spirit-endowed gifting, for the body to function.

Last Sunday was our Ministry Connections Sunday, an opportunity to explore the ministries of the church and see where we each might fit in. But this functioning as a body must extend far beyond formal ministries, beyond home fellowships. It is easy for individualism to affect how we view church life. But the church is not a collection of individuals. It is a local part of the family of God which stretches around the world and through time.

God's Spirit has equipped us with gifts for sharing with one another, gifts that are to be used for building one another up, whether spiritually or materially. These gifts are not for our own individual benefit but for the proper functioning of the body. All the gifts are

important. Some are teaching gifts; some are helping gifts. Some of the helping gifts involve giving generously. John Lennon told us to imagine a world where there is no need. That's one solution: to imagine a world with no need. But it seems that God has so designed things that this side of heaven there will always be need. In ancient Israel it was taken for granted that there would be the poor, the widow, the orphan. It is as if they were there as a test by God to see how the covenant community would treat them. In the New Testament we see that the church included the poor and widows. Deacons were set aside to provide material care for them. We have deacons here who do a wonderful job providing material care for those in need. We have a need fund, and are constantly amazed at your generosity to give to this fund. The solution is not to get rid of the need in the first place, but that those in a position to help should help those in need. It is good that the needs are there because then we can help together. Repeatedly we read of Paul gathering a collection from the churches to help the church in Jerusalem at a time of famine. He urged the saints to contribute generously not for a building or a program, but to help their brothers and sisters, whom they had never met, a thousand miles away across the sea, in their time of need.

In conclusion, how are we to think of ourselves in relationship to one another? Together, we are the people of God. God has united us in Christ, in a union which stretches across every division the world has. Through his Spirit he is equipping us and transforming us so that we function as a people, as his people. We are so much more than just a collection of individuals; we are a family, God's family, called to live life together.

2012.09.16

1. Keith and Kristyn Getty, *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*, © 2005 Thankyou Music.

EMBRACING THE WORLD?



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 are we 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. This 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 in 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 in 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” (John 1:14). 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 (*poiēma*, 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 will 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 is not 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 is 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 reembodied. 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 are 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 does not 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 are 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 is 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 is 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 have 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.⁵

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’s 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 did not 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 us at PBCC, because we are 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 us 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)**

2012.09.23

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: Harper-SanFrancisco, 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: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1997), 212.