

## **Re-Creating the Image of God**

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Text Colossians 1:15-20

What do we mean when we say that Jesus Saves? What does Jesus save us from? How can a person who lived two thousand years ago save me from anything in my life today?

### **Substitutionary Atonement**

In the context in which I grew up, there was only one way to understand salvation – as Carol said last week, one golf club in the bag. It went something like this: I was a sinner before God and so I deserved to die and go to hell for eternity. But because Jesus was God, when he died he took my punishment and everybody else's. As a result, there was a credit waiting to be applied to my account. If I accepted Jesus' payment, then I wouldn't need to die and go to hell.

I remember one Sunday school craft where we filled in the blanks of John 3:16 with our own names. “For God so loved [Kevin] that he gave his only begotten Son, so that if [Kevin] believes in him, [Kevin] would not perish, but would have eternal life.” This craft illustrates perfectly how my view of salvation worked. Notice that this story doesn't need to talk about Jesus' birth or life at all, except as the necessary means to Jesus' death. The fact that Jesus died was the only thing that mattered, and if he needed to be born and live to make it possible, then so be it.

### **The difference Athanasius makes**

Years later, in my first year studying theology, I read a little book by St Athanasius, called *On the Incarnation*. Athanasius lived in the second century, CE, and was one of the earliest theologians of the church. What I found surprising in this book was that Athanasius talks about salvation in a very different way. You can tell just by the title that Athanasius is just as interested in Jesus' birth and life as his death. And this theology is still quite influential in the orthodox tradition of the church.

For me, I had always understood the problem to be that I was a rule-breaker, and God needed to find some way to forgive me without breaking his own rules. But for Athanasius, the problem is entirely different.

### **The corruption of the image of God**

Athanasius says that, shortly after we were created, humanity was deceived by the devil and, because of this deceit, human nature was corrupted and was heading toward destruction. The tension in the story comes from the fact that human beings were created in the image of God, and God had declared humanity to be very good. For Athanasius, the problem is not about you or me being a rule breaker and needing forgiveness. The problem is about the distortion and self-destruction of God's highest creation. As a creator – as an artist – God could not allow God's best work to be defaced in this way.

So what could God do? Humanity was created to be the image of God, but the corruption was getting worse and worse, and all of humanity was heading toward destruction. God couldn't allow God's image to be defaced. But God also couldn't destroy the image. What would this say about God?

### **Why the corruption of the image of God matters to God**

Athanasius illustrates this tension with a story. He talks about a king who founded a city, but most of us probably aren't familiar with this analogy, so let's talk about a hero who has a road named after him. Let's talk about Wayne Gretzky.

Imagine that the city of Edmonton calls up Wayne Gretzky and tells him that they would like to name a freeway after him. They tell him it will be a magnificent freeway, with a boulevard and hanging planters and decorative light poles. It will be wide and smooth – a pleasure to drive. And so Wayne Gretzky consents to have his name attached, and the city begins to build this road, but after years of corruption and neglect, the road is only partially complete. The boulevard has been taken out of the plans in order to save costs, and the surface is full of potholes and sink holes that occasionally swallow motorbikes and cars, and sometimes even trucks. It has become a hangout for thieves and murderers, and all kinds of unsavoury activities take place along this road.

What can Wayne Gretzky do? The road is becoming so bad that it's an insult to his own reputation. Drivers curse if they have to use Wayne Gretzky drive, and his Wikipedia article is starting to talk more about this terrible road than about his stellar hockey career. Should Gretzky write to the city to have his name removed from the road? People will still remember it and call it by that name. Should he use all his money and connections to have the road demolished? What a horrible end to his legacy.

### **God's solution: personal involvement**

In Athanasius' story, the king (but in our story, the hockey hero) finds a unique solution. He decides to go to the place himself, to set things right. Wayne Gretzky drives on the road, and surveys what is wrong with it. He moves to Edmonton and spends his own time and energy rebuilding the road. In the same way, for Athanasius, God's solution to the corruption of human nature was to come and live with humanity – to become a human being himself and get involved in order to set things right.

This isn't a new idea. One of the most important concepts for early Judaism was the immanence or nearness of God. They talked about the tabernacling of God because they remembered that God had lived among them in a tent. Likewise, in their practises of hospitality, they expected God to show up in the form of a stranger. And they named God “Immanuel” – God with us.

Early Christian theologians picked up on this theme of the nearness of God and applied it to Jesus. They spoke of the Incarnation, from the Latin word “carne” which we use to talk about flesh or meat. So, just as carnivores are meat eaters, the Incarnation is the meat-ification or enfleshment of God. In the person of Jesus Christ, the earliest Christians said, Immanuel became flesh.

So as you can see, this story is a little bit different than the one that I grew up with, and maybe the one that you grew up with. Rather than talking about rule-breaking and forgiveness, Athanasius described the problem more like defacing a portrait – the image of God. And God's solution was to get personally involved, to be incarnated, rather than to let it continue.

### **Re-drawing the image of the invisible God**

But how did the Incarnation solve God's problem? Athanasius uses the example of an artist and a portrait. He talks about a portrait that has been stained and defaced or graffitied. When this happens, the artist doesn't throw out the portrait. The artist has the subject return and sit for the portrait again, and then repaints the image on the same material.

We read in Genesis that Adam and Eve were the portrait created in God's image. But that portrait was defaced and, like a photocopy of a photocopy of an old photograph, it was only getting worse. The image of God was becoming so distorted that the human race was calling goodness bad and badness good. But, for Athanasius, God didn't need to forgive humanity, God needed to re-draw humanity to be what it was meant to be. So, in the Incarnation, God returned for another sitting. As it says in Colossians 1:15, which we read together this morning, Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

### **(Re-)Infecting Humanity with the spark of Divinity**

But you still might be wondering: Sure, the Incarnation restored the image of God in Jesus. But how could God becoming one human being change all the rest of humanity? What is the logic here? For this part of the story, we have to change the metaphor from an artist to a doctor, and we have to think about humanity as a corporate body rather than a collection of individuals. For Athanasius, humanity is a single entity, like a body. "Human beings are in such solidarity with each other," writes Athanasius, that "by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all." And so, by becoming a human being, God didn't merely provide an example for us to follow. Jesus' life really changed something in the universe. It effected a difference in our very beings. Athanasius says that, by becoming flesh, God, like a physician, injected divinity into the human race.

It is because the human race is like a body that Adam's corruption, like a virus, could quickly spread and infect all of humanity. But in Jesus Christ, the cure is introduced. And, like antibiotics attacking an infection, or like gene therapy that scientists hope to develop, the image of God began to spread throughout the human race, changing us, imperceptibly at first, into a truly human humanity. In Christ, the new Adam, the image of God is being re-created in humanity, and we are being inoculated against death.

### **Seeing the image of God**

I got about this far in writing my sermon this week, and I thought, "wow, that sounds pretty great! But it doesn't look like the world I live in." So I have to ask, where is the image of God located? It's hard to see sometimes. We look around ourselves at the world, and it's all too easy to identify with Athanasius' assessment that "men, having turned from the contemplation of God to evil of their own devising... were in the process of becoming corrupted entirely, and death had them completely under its dominion."

What is the evil of our own devising that we contemplate? Human beings spend billions every year building and researching new ways to kill each other. Almost all of our innovation and technology begins with military spending – what Dwight Eisenhower called the Military-Industrial Complex. We've changed our agriculture so much that the phrase "Industrial Farming" exists. We've even found ways to produce seeds that can't reproduce: so-called "suicide seeds," so that farmers in poorer nations have to buy their seed every year instead of saving them and reusing them. Or,

when we look at the furniture and devices of modern life, they are not only made at a poor quality in order to save costs, but are indeed designed to become obsolete and be replaced, rather than fixed. I'm not talking here about the unfortunate side-effects of well-intentioned plans. I'm talking about the deliberate and planned exploitation or destruction of humanity by humanity in our quest for domination. It sometimes seems that we are still in the process of becoming corrupted entirely, and that death has us completely under its dominion.

So what happened? Did God's experiment fail? Was the cure that was introduced in Jesus Christ unable to save humanity? Or has the image of God been corrupted and defaced all over again?

It's tempting to point to admirable individuals like Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, or Martin Luther King Jr., and say, "look at those people, they show us the image of God."

But if Athanasius is right, then the spark of "god-ness" isn't just in individual persons. The image of God belongs to a community. The incarnation was effective precisely because human beings are connected to each other. It won't work to try to isolate them, to say that this one here is the image of God, but that one there is not. The image of God is a corporate reality. Perhaps, if we want to see the image of God, one place to look might be the body of Christ, the church.

### **The broken body of Christ**

Of course, the church is a broken body. In the Rwandan Genocide, both the Hutus and the Tutsis were largely Christian, and yet in a period of 100 days, they killed approximately 800,000 of each other. In the First World War, the English and French and Germans all believed that God was on their side as they killed other Christians. And even though Mennonites have been nominally pacifist, I wonder if any Christian group has had more infighting, or been more schismatic than we have been. Prior to the 1500's there was only one great rift between the Orthodox and the Catholic churches. Even Martin Luther tried his best to avoid splitting the church, because he believed that the Catholic Church could accommodate great diversity. But Mennonites practically invented church splits, often for the most trivial of matters.

Even still, I believe this broken institution is God's instrument to infect the world with divinity. The body of Christ is still injecting god-ness into the world. But if the image of God resides in the church, it's not because the church is an ideal institution. That has never been God's way. God didn't dwell in Jesus because he was a physically perfect specimen of humanity. Jesus revealed God through his birth as a humble refugee and through his life as a homeless preacher of compassion and justice. Jesus was killed, his body was broken, not as a sacrifice that God required, but as a consequence of how he lived. In Jesus, God embraced suffering and brokenness and transformed it into life for all of humanity.

If the church is the body of Christ, then it is in the church's brokenness that it most faithfully reflects the image of God.

### **The image of God today**

Leading up to the Second World War, the confessing church in Germany was broken. This part of the church was broken and suffered because it rejected the claims of the Fuhrer. Its members were persecuted because they harboured fugitives and helped them escape to safety. And in its brokenness, the confessing church infected humanity with a little bit of divinity, and all of humanity was re-created a little bit more into the image of God, inoculated a little bit more against death.

Then there are the Mennonites, who, as I mentioned, are incredibly schismatic. We were broken by the war in Russia, and came together in a rare moment to create Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Disaster Service. Yet, through these agencies, born out of the brokenness of the church, a little bit of God has infected the entire world, and we have become more truly human, and inoculated a little bit more against death.

On a personal level, the church has been for me a school for learning how to be truly human. Though I am often a distorted image of God, the church is where I meet people who are different than me: people who work at different jobs, people who are older or younger than me, who are in different socio-economic classes than me, people who I could never meet anywhere else. And we come together as equals, gathered by the story of Jesus. And because we gather and rub shoulders, I am learning to be gentler, to consider different points of view, to appreciate music and food and stories that I would never have been exposed to otherwise. I am becoming more alive. And so, even today, the story of Jesus is inoculating me against death, transforming me into the image of God, a truly human human.

### **A fleshy, meaty God**

We worship a fleshy, meaty God – a God of sinew and bone and muscle tissue. Or, as one author puts it, a beaked and feathered God. We worship a God who became weakness and death. It was the broken body of Jesus that was the innocuous container in which a cure – the spark of divinity – was hidden and transmitted into the body of humanity. God could never have done it from the outside. But through Jesus' body, God entered into humanity and has saved us by infecting the entire species with the image of God.

Just like golf clubs, there are circumstances that require different views of the atonement. There may be a time when we need to think of God as forgiving us. But there may also be a time when, as I've done today, we need to imagine God as infecting us with divinity, God re-drawing us as the truly human human. As you head into your week, I would invite you to consider your own story. Has the image of God been defaced in yourself, in your family, in your community? How have you, your family, or your community been redrawn and reshaped into the image of God?