

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost- October 30, 2005

Scripture lessons: Philippians 2:5-8 & Romans 8:31-39

BASIC CHRISTIAN BELIEFS, VI- “God Comes to Us in Jesus Christ”

Let’s say someone you care deeply about, someone you feel significant responsibility for- your own child, let’s say, or some other child or young person in this church, or another family member, a good friend, perhaps even you, yourself, comes to you and says seriously, “I don’t believe in God.” What do you do?

George Buttrick recalls facing that situation more than a few times during his years as Harvard University chaplain. Students would come to his office, plop into a chair, and declare their *disbelief* in God. Buttrick wasn’t sure what they expected him to say, but he did say, “Tell me what kind of God you don’t believe in. I probably don’t believe in that God either.”

Buttrick understood clearly what we’ve highlighted throughout this sermon series on our basic Christian beliefs- namely, that there are many different kinds of God we could believe (or disbelieve) in *and* we all believe (or disbelieve) in some kind of God or other. The key questions become, “*Which* God do we believe (or disbelieve) in *and* is the God we believe (or disbelieve) in *really* God?”

As we’ve also stressed repeatedly in this series, as Christians, the God we believe in is the Triune Mystery who is love. This God, we affirm, is the true God and no other. In love, this God creates all that is and invites all of us, as God’s creatures, to find the genuine fulfillment of our lives by living in the same loving harmony that God does.

In sin, we don’t do that. We turn away, we fall away from God’s original intent and all sorts of destructive strife and disharmony among us are the result. In love, however, God never gives up on any of us. With divine providence, God remains “ever faithful, upholding, blessing, and guiding creation to its appointed goal” (Daniel Migliore, cf. last week’s sermon). The life of loving harmony among all God’s creatures that God originally intends is that goal, and with almighty love God will accomplish it. That’s what we believe.

But is our belief true? In closing last week, we kept asking that question. We kept asking it because there’s still so much innocent suffering and death in this world. If the Triune God who is love in fact is the only true God, if this God in fact is “ever faithful, upholding, blessing, and guiding creation to its appointed goal”, then why, for instance, are there still so many babies drowned in tsunamis, crushed by earthquakes, or killed at the hands of abusive parents? Can we honestly maintain our belief in God’s supposedly loving and almighty providence when so much innocent suffering and death still stalk?

Last week, with the book of Job we admitted that the workings of God’s providence often are incomprehensible to us. Especially in cases of such obviously innocent suffering and death, we don’t even begin trying to explain the particulars of how God’s providence remains at work in them. But we can sustain our faith in it by . . . looking to Jesus.

That’s what George Buttrick did when his Harvard students told him about the Gods they disbelieved in. He discovered they almost always had in mind some other God than the one revealed in Jesus Christ. That was true even when they thought the Christian God was the one they were rejecting.

The nature and power of the love the Triune God is often are misunderstood. Like George Buttrick with his students, we need constantly to return to Jesus to clear up our misunderstandings. We need steadily to return to the center of God’s revelation in Christ in order to understand more deeply. What do we see there that helps sustain our faith in God’s love even in the face of innocent suffering’s worst?

In Jesus, first of all, we see one of us. We see a flesh-and-blood human being, a baby born 2000 years ago to a peasant girl named Mary and a carpenter named Joseph. We see them as Jews living in Palestine under the crush of Roman occupation.

We see that with Mary and Joseph, Jesus is raised like any other Jewish boy of his time and place. Under his parents' care, he's influenced and shaped both by the ancient heritage and present circumstances of his people. Like any other child anywhere, he experiences hunger and thirst and pain. Like any child, he learns and grows and matures. He discovers what it's like to have friends and grieve their loss. He learns what it's like to have enemies who are out to get you.

Yet, at the same time, he is no ordinary "one of us". As he grows into his public ministry, people are astonished by the scope and depth of his compassion. They see how his heart reaches out especially to those scorned by others. The sick, the beggars, prostitutes, tax collectors, women and children- everyone considered in his day to be inferior or outcast- those are the ones he particularly seeks out and welcomes as friends to his table. He criticizes and violates the conventional wisdom of his time whenever he thinks it inhibits people from loving each other or tries to drive false wedges between them. That's why, for example, he chooses to heal on the Sabbath and takes to task any who try to set themselves up as righteously superior.

In his life and teaching he calls for a community of care and compassion that includes *everyone*. Love your enemies, he says. Forgive seventy times seven. Go the second mile. Give your cloak as well as your coat. Why should we live this way and how is it possible? Because, Jesus insists, "The reign of God is at hand." That's the conviction at the heart of his life. Jesus trusts in the depths of his soul that the Maker of all heaven and earth is "Abba" or "Papa". He proclaims that Abba always is drawing near to us in boundless, passionate, and tender love- love that desires to embrace *all*.

*Abba's* love seeks out the poor, the lowly, and the captive who live both among us and in us. Simply open our hearts to this love and be set free, Jesus says. He assures us that we don't have to be anxious or afraid. This life of love truly is what we're made for. It's made possible, Jesus teaches, when we accept God's love for us and allow it to flow freely through us. This is the life to which Jesus himself is completely committed.

Eventually, it gets him killed. In his faithfulness to God's all-embracing love, Jesus finds himself frequently at odds with the religious and political authorities of his day. In conflict with them, he insists on God's freely given love rather than on righteousness gained through observance of the Law. In opposition to them, he continues including everyone, even the worst of the outcast, within the arms of God's love, saying even that prostitutes and sinners might enter the reign of God before the oh-so-respectable ones.

The powers that be all find this intolerable- either blasphemous or heretical or frightening, or, at the very least, destabilizing. They conclude Jesus can't be allowed to go on. They nail him to a cross, executing him in the most torturous and humiliating way, a way the Romans reserved only for the worst of criminals.

*And yet this is not the end of Jesus.*

Soon those who've been his closest disciples say he's alive again. They say he has appeared to them, not resuscitated, but resurrected, not as a ghost, but as a resurrected body. He's come to them as the same Jesus they've known before, but in a new and utterly different way. They claim he's been raised from dead, taken up into the eternal life of God, and now is present always in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

What all of this means for Jesus is certainly beyond our capacity to say, but what it meant to those first witnesses and what it means for us now is at the core of our Christian faith. For in the reality of the risen Christ and in the coming of his Spirit we see at last who Jesus really is. We see what his life, death, and resurrection really mean.

They mean first that the Jesus of Nazareth who walks this earth 2000 years ago is indeed fully human. He is one of us, but not only in the sense of sharing our finitude and all the fear, anxiety,

and uncertainty that goes with it. He also is fully human in the “ideal” sense, ideal as the one who reveals to us how to live authentically in the midst of our limitations. Transparent to God’s love, he remains ultimately trusting, secure, and hopeful in the midst of his anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. In doing that, he shows us the possibilities of human being to which we, too, are called.

But in his cross we also see how deeply we resist this call to our true humanity. We see how even the best among us, both those who know Jesus most intimately, even those who are supposed to be the official guardians of religious truth, turn away from or against him and make possible the horror of his crucifixion.

Yet even more remarkably and to the point, we also see in his resurrection and the coming of his Spirit that Jesus truly is *God*. We see that Jesus is not only the model of true humanity- he is also *the Christ*. He’s the one in whom *God* reveals most fully who *God* is and what *God* is doing in this world.

Through Jesus’ resurrection and the descent of his Spirit, we see that the love manifested in and through his life isn’t just the love of another good person. It’s not just another wistful come and go kind of love that passes away finally and sadly at death. Instead, in the risen and ascended Christ we see that Jesus’ love is the love of *God*.

Jesus is *God* in the flesh, *God* become one of us, *God* showing us what *God’s* love really is like. Jesus’ witness to the coming reign of God’s limitless love and Jesus’ call for us to open to and live out of that love is *God* speaking to us. Jesus’ special concern for and companionship with the outcast is *God’s* concern and companionship.

Most amazing and even shocking of all- Jesus’ suffering on the cross in faithfulness to God’s love is *God’s* suffering, too. Jesus on the cross means that in the midst of all the world’s innocent suffering and death, God is not aloof from us. God is not in some far off, distant heaven, blissfully isolated and detached. Instead, Jesus on the cross is *God* on the cross. Jesus on the cross means that *God* suffers the worst of this world’s innocent suffering and death *from the inside out*.

Are we racked with sorrow and acquainted with grief? Do we love and have our love betrayed? Are we broken, bleeding and dead from the world’s crazy and often mindless injustice? If so, we know now that the true God, the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, is with us in all those places. In Jesus’ life, passion, and death we see that God has been, is, and will be in all those places, suffering with us, for as long as they are.

In Jesus’ resurrection, however, we also see that those places will not be forever. God’s loving compassion is not in the end futile or impotent. God’s suffering love in Jesus Christ is instead the greatest power of all.

It’s not the power to do instantly whatever God wants. Rather it’s the power to woo back in the mystery of patient and providential love the whole of creation gone astray. It’s the power, as St. Paul once put it, through which God reconciles the world to God (II Corinthians 5:18-19). It’s the power through which the loving harmony of all that God originally intends will at last come to be.

On the cross of Jesus, God sheds the tears, carries the sorrows, and suffers the pains of all creation at their worst. But in the resurrection of Jesus, God begins to wipe away those tears, relieve those sorrows, and remove those pains until at last they are no more and never will be again.

This is our faith. *Nothing* in all of creation, “neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth will (ever) be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). Amen!

Kurt Kirchoff