

## “A New Creed: Part II”

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Last Sunday, I began a series of sermons on “A New Creed.” As I mentioned last week this creed is a relatively recent statement of faith, formulated by the United Church of Canada in the past few decades and then 2012 was officially included in the United Church of Canada’s “Basis of Union.” As a church Creed, it deals primarily with belief in God and our relationship to God. Thus it begins with the words, “We are not alone. We live in God’s world. We believe in God” and then goes through a various statements about the God we confess. Today we consider the phrase, “who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new.” This is a pivotal phrase for us, after all, the Christian faith was founded by the first followers of the man Jesus of Nazareth.

It is those first followers who were gathered with Jesus at the moment we enter in our reading from John’s gospel this morning. Jesus had just informed his disciples that he is about to depart from them and they are troubled by this. They are troubled as they are not yet able to fully understand Jesus’ mission that was not only to them, but to the world and for eternity. Jesus through his crucifixion and resurrection still had much to reveal about his character and nature. And not only *his* character and nature, but that of the one he called his “Father in heaven.” As he says to his disciples, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

The Father that Jesus speaks of is God. Jesus is saying to his disciples that he is in God and that God is in him. In other words, through him and in him, his disciples have come to know who God truly is. God is exactly like Jesus. This is a startling statement made by Jesus. It’s actually one of the reasons why he was crucified. He claimed to speak and work on behalf

of God. For the religious authorities of the day this was scandalous. It was blasphemy.

Blasphemy isn't a word we hear used much in discourse these days. It means to show a lack of respect or contempt for the Divine. But was Jesus really being contemptuous and disrespectful of God as we consider how he lived and what he did and what he preached? Could God be like Jesus?

Jesus was a man who taught people about the power of forgiveness, the possibility of being born again to new life, the importance of loving one's enemies. This was a human who was filled with compassion for one's who had known and experienced little or no compassion in their lives. This was a human who was willing to take the form of a servant, a man who had washed the feet of his disciples, who made sure people had enough to eat, who gave the new commandment to "love one another." This was a human being who appeared in a world where people were constantly being excluded and left out, yet one of the last things he says to his disciples is that in his Father's house, realm, kingdom...call it what you will...there are many rooms -a place and a home for them.

Jesus says, "believe that the Father is in me and that I am in him; but if you do not, believe me because of the works themselves." In other words, believe me because of how I have lived and what I have done, am doing, and will do. Jesus is not "just saying" ...he is not just offering thoughts and ideas and a bunch of words... he wants his disciples to reflect on the kind of life and being, character and nature that he embodied. He is the Word made flesh. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Colossians (2:9), "in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."

It was this belief in the divinity of Jesus that got the first Christians in a great deal of trouble. Many of the early followers of Christ were labelled atheists because they chose to believe that the fullness of God was in this man Jesus. They were considered atheists because they did not believe the commonly accepted gods of the day. In the first century, at a time when the church was still in its infancy and Christians were constantly being tortured and persecuted for their beliefs, a fellow named Justin Martyr wrote a letter to Caesar in which he said "Christians confess to be atheists in so far as they do not believe in the gods of the time."

This might seem like a strange concept to many of us, that Christians would somehow be considered atheists or that they might consider themselves to be atheists. Especially given our own day in age where the so-called "new-atheism movement" have made the Abrahamic traditions that includes Christianity a primary target. Listen to a moment to a description of God given by Richard Dawkins of the God he sees portrayed in the Old Testament. He says, "God is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." If I accepted that description then I have to say that I would agree with Dawkins in that I also don't believe in the god he doesn't believe in. I reject that kind of god, in the same way those early Christians like Justin Martyr rejected the gods of their day. The ones who called themselves atheists because they refused to believe in the images of god that although widespread and publicly exchanged...they were considered to be distortions. They did not depict not the true God they had come to believe through Christ and the apostolic teachings about him.

You know, in this world, there are many images of god that can distort and confuse and even estrange people in their relationship to god. Images that drive people into disbelief. I want to mention just a few. One of the many ways we distort who God is by relying on some of the traditional philosophical understandings of god. Throughout the ages, even long before Christ and ever since, philosophers have sat and talked and postulated all sorts of theories and understandings about god. Some are accurate, but other descriptions get in the way of true faith and an authentic relationship with the divine. For example, many philosophers posit that God needs to be all powerful in order to be God. God needs to be omnipotent and in control of everything. Because of this belief, God has been blamed for all sorts of things from tsunamis, to earthquakes, to almost any evil that infects our existence...even the unpredictable winds at the Masters this weekend that is causing so much suffering and consternation!

Yet in Jesus we meet a God who instead of being in control, through his crucifixion on the cross gives up control. We see in Jesus, one who becomes subject to the powers of this world, who comes in the midst of the suffering of this world and suffers too. This is not a God who is immutable and unchangeable, as philosophers have believed god needed to be in order to be god. Nor is this some God that just reflects some principle of goodness. In Jesus we discover a God who is different.

Jesus comes in person, in action, as the bringer, the receiver and the embodiment of the transformative power of the God of love. Jesus offers an alternative view to the dominant, often static, philosophical understandings of god...to instead give us a different shape of a living God and of human life itself.

Another way we distort god is by psychological means. Psychological projections of God have also been around for a long time. We're not always aware that we have them because we tend to internalize these beliefs and they can exist at the level of the subconscious. Yet because these understandings are there in us, we carry them over into other areas of life. An example of this can be how our understanding of authority colours what we believe about God.

This is why some people who have had overbearing punitive parents, can come to believe that God is also overbearing and punitive. The behavior of leaders of nations or bosses can also be legitimized because of this. There are many who have endured a great deal of suffering and hardship when God gets framed in such psychological terms. God becomes the justification and legitimization of bad behavior. We can make God our excuse for bad behavior and turn it into something acceptable. We can end up with an understanding of God who becomes a type of overlord. Yet in Jesus, this image of God is non-existent. Yes, Jesus might be called Lord, but a different kind of Lord. A King, but a different kind of King. He may call God Father, but a different kind of father. Instead as I mentioned earlier, we have a God who takes the form of a servant, one who washes the feet of his disciples, considers them his equals and calls them friends...a God who gives up control.

Now there are many other psychological projections of God we can make. I will mention just one more. That is when we see ourselves as God. God becomes a function of our ego. I may have told some of you this before but it's like dog theology and cat theology. Dog theology is saying, "you love me, you feed me, you pick up after me, you must be God." Cat theology is, "you love me, you feed me, you pick up after me...I must be God!" That's sometimes what happens when our ego takes over. We believe that we are the centre of the

universe. I must be God. Everyone else exists for my benefit and pleasure. I see myself as god (even though I might not want to admit it) thus distorting the true image of God. Yet in Jesus, we see a God who exists not to receive the attention and the adoration of others, instead we meet a God who put the needs of others first. Not that God does not want our love and adoration it's just that this is not primary to who God is in Christ. As Jesus says in John 10, "I have come in order that you might have life."

You see, there are many ways to distort the image of God. Many ways that we can become estranged from God and as a result never know who God truly is. It is why we are called to believe that God has "come in Jesus, then word made flesh to reconcile and make new. Jesus comes to reconcile God to the world, to reconcile us in our humanity to one another when our images of God get twisted. Jesus comes to bring a newness of faith. As followers of Jesus we believe in a God who is Christlike and should be suspicious of the God who is not Christ like.

This is something that the theologian and Christian thinker Bradley Jersak alludes to in a recent book. Jersak recalls a visit he made to a private Christian school where he gave a series of talks and proposed that if God is real, then to call God good, God must be good, like the goodness seen in Jesus. After his talk, he was approached by a young woman who came to him and confessed that years earlier in her life she had rejected Christianity, yet after his lecture she had questions...a lot of questions...and her eyes squinted at him when she said this. Obviously, people hadn't taken her questions seriously before...

Jersak notes that this young woman's questions are ones that he has encountered time and again...as have I. Questions that he himself had needed to work through...as have I. He

knew that for this woman, there was pain in her questions and that addressing them would not be easy, but he knew that he needed to as best he could in order to overcome some of those distortions. Their conversation went something like this, and for the sake of confidentiality Jersak gives the girl the pseudonym Jess.

Jess: "Why is Jesus so loving and God so mean?"

Jersak: God is not mean. He's exactly like Jesus and Jesus is not mean.

Jess: Then why does God send people to hell to burn them forever and ever?

Jersak: He doesn't. That would be silly. The God who is love, who is like Jesus, would never do that would he? That would make no sense would it?

Jess: No. But my grandma is not a Christian, and she died and now some of my family cries and cries because they believe she is in hell.

Jersak: Well, I can imagine someone who was truly wicked perishing, but would you say your Grandma was wicked?

Jess: No

Jersak: Jesus shows us what God is like. Do you think you could leave your grandma in her hands?

Jess: Without hesitation...Yes.

Jess: But why does God command people to commit genocide in the OT? Why kill innocent people?

Jersak: If God were like Jesus would he do that?

Jess: No

Jersak: Well of course not because God is exactly like Jesus.

Jess: Than why does it say he did?

Jersak: Well, you tell me.

Jess: Because they didn't know what God was really like? They described god based on what they thought?

Jersak: Sure. But can you imagine the Father described in the Prodigal son or the Father Jesus prayed to doing that?

Jess: No. But I still have questions...a lot of questions. God is the creator of everything and he's in control of everything and causes everything to happen for a purpose.

Jersak says: No.

Jess responds: "Huh?"

Jersak: Do you think God causes rape? Is rape for a purpose?

Jess: emphatically NO!

Jersak: No. Rape is just evil. There's no lesson. That's not how God teaches lessons. And he doesn't do control. That's why terrible things happen. But we wouldn't want him to control us. Would you?

Jess: shakes her head no.

Jersak: So God never causes evil and he doesn't use control to prevent us from doing evil. But God does care. God loves and cares and wants to heal those who have been hurt by evil.

Jess: I have three relatives who were molested, but I wasn't. I couldn't understand because people always say God is in control and everything happens for a reason.

Jersak: So, no God didn't cause that in any way. But if God were like Jesus, would you be able to put your relatives in his care?

And the young woman responded without hesitation, "Yes."

Now I know that was just one conversation. Yet the questions of that young woman echo the questions of many who wrestle with what to believe when it comes to God. Although the examples may change and the life experiences may differ, the questions in many lives are often similar. I pray that our answers, when we come to know Jesus will also be similar to that young woman and to those first followers of Jesus who wondered which way to go. For to know Jesus and his way, should lead any one to respond yes with confidence that 'yes' means 'life.' For as Athanasius of Alexandria put it, "Jesus did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering humankind. For Him...the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him." Even ones, who say that God has "come in Jesus, the word made flesh, to reconcile and make new."