

God's Reversal

Amos 8:1-8
Colossians 1:15-23

Scout's honor, this is true: in the writing software I use, when I start to type my last name it auto-fills "Riggins" in as "righteousness". It's very flattering. I would **love** to believe I am righteous. But I know better. I have too much affinity with John Calvin ever to believe I, on my own merit, could earn God's approval. I attended Al Holder's Sunday school class on Calvin, in which he reminded us of Calvin's understanding of human nature. (Hint: it was not very rosy.) I have too much water under the bridge, too long a track record, to think I could ever qualify as righteous. But, while I may not be holy, I have this going for me: at least I know I sin.

But is such self-focus spiritually useful? The "Christian writers" I tend to read tend to be gadflies. I appreciate people who think for themselves and critique group-think. I read everything I can get my hands on by Simone Weil, Leonard Sweet and their like. But what is their like? Simone Weil was a French Jew who converted to Christianity during World War II and wrote powerful essays combining existentialism and spirituality. Leonard Sweet is a southern-fried church critic from a faith perspective. What could they possibly have in common? They and their ilk do not follow the herd. They have an honest, accurate assessment of other voices. And they seek to follow God's call no matter where it leads. I wish I had one-tenth of their integrity and commitment. I wish we all did.

For over thirty years Leonard Sweet and a group of like-minded thinkers have warned of a specific modern heresy: the deification of ourselves. We have made gods of ourselves. In his book Red Skies, Sweet argues, “We have twisted the very real, necessary conversation about our personal identities—sexual, gender, personal—into a manifesto claiming that whoever and whatever I believe myself to be must control my world. And yours. In short, we have made ourselves false gods.” Leonard Sweet is a progressive Christian. He uses his rapier-like wit gently but decisively to argue with Christians who condemn other human beings. At the same time, he has no use for the endless self-obsession of social media and those churches that pander to our baser instincts. He's my kind of guy.

In Colossians the Apostle Paul addressed a very different heresy. But his prescription for fighting it applies to our our modern self-absorption as well. Jesus is God. Completely. From before time began. He accepted a thorough demotion to become a human being, one of us. He died as we all shall do. Yet his death made life possible. He has reconciled us to himself. Though we, through our self-focus and the whole panoply of our sins, have estranged ourselves from God, Jesus has restored our relationship. His death on the cross has paid the bill we owed because of our sins. Though we remain disobedient to God, Christ has redeemed us.

Some years before writing the letter we know as Colossians, Paul had walked into Colossae, even then an obscure town in western Turkey. Colossae no longer exists; its site is well-known but is so unimportant no archaeologist has bothered to

excavate it. To this day, no road more than one lane wide leads to the site. Paul apparently wandered into the town on his second great missionary journey. He could not have planned to go there. He happened upon it on his way to somewhere else. But then, we sometimes stumble over important things on our way to someplace else.

The word heresy means dangerously incorrect teaching about God and God's intent. Like worshiping the United States of America, or hating the United States of America, two heresies of our age. The specific heresy Paul encountered in Colossae predated Jesus' birth into this world. For years a world view had spread across Asia Minor and southeastern Europe. Its roots lay in Greek philosophy, though none of the classical Greek teachers of some four hundred years earlier—Aristotle, Socrates, etc.—would have recognized it. This view posited the existence of great numbers of unseen, spiritual beings who mediated between heaven and earth. The gods, perfect, detached, indifferent to our sphere, could interact only with these beings, who were untainted with human imperfection. (The Greek word most often used in this school of thought to describe human nature translates as “dirty”.) When Paul walked into Colossae and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, those who adhered to this world view naturally assumed Jesus was one of those unseen mediators.

Paul could have nothing to do with this view. For him, and hopefully for us, Jesus was and is nothing less than God. Alright, God born as one of us. Okay, God who consented to die. Yet God who controlled the entire process, indeed, the one God who ordained the whole time line. Paul's words matter to us today because of

our self-focused heresy. We want to star in our own show. Paul shone the spotlight squarely on Jesus. “He is the image of God.” This sentence does not, in the original Greek, mean that Jesus looks like God—whatever image that would be. It means rather that Jesus' actions and his very being are identical to God's. Indeed, the book of Genesis tells us we too are made in that same image of God, though of course we distort the image with our sins.

Paul continued on to claim that “all things have been created through him and for him.” This is a roundabout way of stating that Jesus *is* the Creator. He existed before any other part of creation. In fact, he has never *not* existed. And, “He is the head of the body, the church...” This may seem obvious, and perhaps even a bit trivial in comparison with Paul's sweeping claims about Jesus' “Godness”. But it reflects how important the church is in his thinking. Not for nothing did a sailing ship become one of the first common symbols for the church. In a time and place when Christians comprised tiny minorities in the midst of often hostile adherents to other religions, the church was a safe haven, a way to navigate through rocky and stormy waters. Jesus as the head of the church was for Paul the captain of the one institution that could keep his followers spiritually safe.

Next we read that Jesus “is the firstborn from the dead...” This is a reference to his resurrection, and this too was a shot across the bow of an early heresy. From the very start, during the days depicted in the book of Acts, some Christians did not believe Jesus had actually died. If he were in fact God, how could he have died? God

cannot die! Can he?!? He must only have ***appeared*** to have died. And since he did not die he could not have resurrected. He must have hidden away, maybe in heaven some speculated, for those parts of three days before reappearing. To all of which Paul straightforwardly claimed Jesus became the “firstborn from the dead.” The phrase also infers others' resurrections. Others like us.

For Jesus has made peace with all creation through the blood of his cross. In our branch of the Christian tree we have long focused our preaching and teaching on ministries of justice and inclusion. And there is nothing wrong with those things. But every now and then we need to remind ourselves we worship the God who died that we might live. The twentieth-century theologian Arnold Harnack called this the “kernel of Christianity”, the heart of the matter. Harnack was a classical liberal whose writings focused mostly on applying biblical insights to the civil rights movement. Yet he saw Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection as the heart of our religion. He also called these two events “God's reversal”. In wrestling, a reversal happens when control changes from one competitor to the other. In theology, “God's reversal” happens when life wrests control over us from death.

Burlap to Cashmere is a Christian band that uses the World Music genre to reach younger generations with the Gospel. Their song Diggitee Dime is set to Greek folk music played by synthesizers and electric guitars. It is legitimately one of my favorite songs of any kind. In their song Chop Chop, set to Los Angeles Techno-Chicano music (I'd never heard of that either, had to look it up) they sing,

Chop chop, man fell
That's where we're from
And the world is crying as we move along

Chop chop, he fell
That's where we belong
And the world is wondering how it all happened

Chop chop, he rose
That's where he went
And the world cannot see him in his glory

Or as Paul put it in Colossians, “You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death...” Again, his body died. Paul admits no possibility of Jesus' death being faked. This matters for us today because we do need to remind ourselves from time to time that we worship the One God, who out of love for unlovable us, died in agony on the cross.

In truth, unless Jesus really died, what are we doing here? I don't know about you, but I can think of any number of other uses for my Sunday mornings. But as Paul wrote, I have this pesky faith that is “securely established and steadfast”. I did not achieve that faith. It comes to all of us as a gift. A gift from the Holy Spirit of the God who died on the cross. Many of us must have wondered why we “do church”. Well, Jesus is the Head of the Church and in him we have forgiveness and reconciliation. This frees us from the dread that must accompany the lack of faith. Moreover, it gives us the energy to answer whatever callings he has given us. This empowers me to answer all the emails, make all the phone calls, serve our Afghan guests, and all the rest of my calling. I answer the call with God's power, not my own. May every one of us find that faith in our risen Lord to do the same.