

Reimaging
Rev. Samuel Weddington, March 8, 2020

Exodus 20:1-7 NRSV

1 Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

We continue our month-long sermon series this morning on the “Rs” of worship. Last week, we saw that worship is grounded in remembrance. We gather to remember God’s goodness and faithfulness, and in our remembering, we experience true rest. We also begin to remember who we truly are. We are God’s children made for the purpose of resting in God and sharing in divine fellowship. In the end, we gather to remember whose we are.

Today, we turn to another “R,” and that is that right worship forces us to *reimage* who we think God is and what God wants of us. In other words, worship is the gathering of the people of God as we faithfully *reimage* God in our hearts and minds, and do away with false idols.

I think this is a perfect topic for Lent. As Jesus prepared himself and his followers to take up a cross and march to Jerusalem, time and again he had to confront the expectations others had of him of what the Messiah ought to be. As we follow him on his way, we need to examine ourselves so that we realize how deficient our visions and images of Jesus are; how we tend to use God for our own purposes, or assume that God loves what we love. As we reimage God in and through Christ, we can finally set our eyes and hearts on the only one worth following. With this in mind, let’s examine Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia...

Galatians 3:23-29 My translation

23 Before the advent of faith, the Law held us in custody, guarding us until faith was revealed. 24 For this purpose the Law was our instructor until Christ, so that we might be declared righteous/rectified/made right by faith. 25 Faith has come now, so we are no longer in need of the instructor’s services, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither is there male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 If, now, you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s children, heirs according to the promise.

So we get to have a little fun this morning. Are you ready? I have a series of images for you to consider, and I want to ask you who you think these people are? What do these images have in common? Here we go... [click through series, or make reference to sheet].

Who is in these images? What is the common thread? It’s quite simple: they are all Jesus. The image of the shepherd boy is the third oldest image we know of that depicts Jesus Christ.¹ Like most of the early images of Jesus the Christians used, Jesus was thought of as a young man, pure and undefiled. The bearded Jesus wouldn’t become popular until the middle of the early Byzantine era. The image of the man that looks like Confucius is actually a Korean depiction of the resurrection of Jesus. I know it is hard to see, but there are nail marks in his hand. In Korea, teachers are scholars. The robe is the robe of a scholar, and as such, since Jesus is a rabbi and Lord, he would be dressed as a scholar.

¹ It is found in the catacomb of Callistus, and dates to the second century. The first known depiction is actually graffiti from the first century that makes fun of Christians. In the depiction, a donkey-headed man is shown crucified. Another crudely drawn person stands next to him, and it reads, “Alexandro worshipping his god.” The insult here, of course, is on two levels. The depiction of Jesus with a donkey’s head is obvious, and I will allow you to draw your own conclusions. Secondly, that a crucified man was worshipped at all reinforces, from the “artist’s” point of view, how silly he thought Christians were. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst of the worst, and the lowest of the low. If you are interested, there is an absolutely stellar book on the subject of early portraits of Jesus entitled, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*, by Robin Margaret Jensen, Fortress Press, 2005.

Finally, notice the Indian folk art depicting Jesus' crucifixion. Now, you may be asking yourself why the color of Jesus' skin is blue, as well as the skin of a few around him. Well, it's complicated, but in Hindu mythology, the world once choked on a poison called "halahala." The only god in that mythology who could save them was Shiva, who drank the poison. The poison turned his body blue.

So, what is going on in this picture? Well, the Christian convert from Hinduism is telling a story. Here, Jesus is the true reality and fulfillment of what the myths of Hinduism point towards.² Jesus Christ on the cross drank of the deep sin and poison of the world and the human heart, took that into himself, and conquered it to save the world and give those who believe on him life. In other words, this artist is representing John 3:14-18.³ Those in blue around him are sinners who are captive to the poison of their sins, and now beg him for forgiveness. In short, this strange representation is the artist's way of saying Jesus is Lord, and Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu are not.

Now, my point this morning isn't to get caught up in alternate theologies. Instead, my intention is to confront each and every one of us with the simple truth that our own mental images, conceptions, and ideas about Jesus, however good or right they may be, are ultimately limited, and fall short of who Jesus really is. In fact, if you think about, the way that most of us in this room think about Jesus is actually in the minority compared to the 2+ billion Christians around the world.

Think of it this way: there are nearly as many folks in Ethiopia that see and think about Jesus in the way we saw in the picture of Jesus healing the man blind from birth as there are evangelical Christians in the United States.⁴ There are more Christians in East and Southeast Asia who identify with Jesus as a scholar, or calming a violent storm, or with a rounded face than there are Christians in the United States.⁵

I have traveled the world, and I have worshipped in Korea, Mongolia, China, Vietnam, Palestinian Bethlehem, Israel, Jordan, Brazil, and many other places. I have worked with and worshipped alongside Hindu converts to Christianity here in the United States. I've stood, as some of you here have stood, in congregations assembled in Ethiopia, and as much as we were united in worship of God, in each and every one of those cases, I've been the outsider looking in. I've realized that my way of talking about, thinking about, and relating to Jesus is my own, and while it has worth and a place at the table, it only scratches the surface of what it means to be Jesus' disciple. I am not, nor will I or you ever be the norm.

And I think that is a wonderful thing. I celebrate it. I'm sure God takes great delight in that fact. In Jesus Christ, by the witness of Scripture, and the working of the Holy Spirit, we are one, but we aren't all the same. God has done this marvelous thing of creating the first truly multiracial, trans-ethnic, global community called the church so that there are endless ways God's people can love him, honor him, serve him, and worship him in Jesus' name. I need my Korean brothers and sisters to help me flesh out what it means to be a Christ follower, and they need me to help them see Jesus in greater detail. We are one body, different parts, and all with Jesus Christ as the head cornerstone. All our other identities and preferences pale in comparison to this one reality.

This is exactly the point Paul is making here in Galatians. There is a controversy afoot in the community, with Jewish Christians insisting on Gentile converts having to be circumcised and follow dietary guidelines in order to follow Christ. The Gentiles are shocked by this, and because many would not, we have evidence that they were

² This is an important point I did not realize until I began to do ministry with a Christian brother and evangelist who had converted from Hinduism. In his training to become a Christian minister, he was encouraged to study his native myths for the purpose of convincing people of the truth of Christianity. The strategy was brilliant and simple: what the adherents to Hinduism thought to be true was only a shadow of the truth fully revealed in Jesus. For these Christian evangelists, this strategy was most effective in that it disarmed the hearer from having to outright reject the world view they grew up with, and allowed them to hear the clear truth of the Gospel, that Jesus Christ is the "the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through [him]" (John 14:6).

³ 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

⁴ The population of Ethiopia is around 105 million, as per reports from 2017. Around 62% of the population (65 million people) is either Protestant, Catholic, or Ethiopian Orthodox. By comparison, estimates of practicing evangelicals in the United States are around 25% of the population (82 million people), as per a 2014 PEW poll.

⁵ There were an estimated 266 million Christians in East and Southeast Asia in 2015. By comparison, the entire Christian population (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and others) of the United States is, optimistically, 241 million. By 2050, the number of Christians in Asia is projected to hit 431 million. See <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2182800/christians-asia-persecuted-oppressed-keeping-faith>.

being slowly pushed out of the community.⁶ Of course, this issue wasn't going away anytime soon. On a whole host of issues, the early church seemed to fight ceaselessly about whose identity trumped the other, and what it meant to be a right follower of Jesus. Jewish Christians emphasized Jesus in relation to Moses and Abraham, while Gentiles often sought to distance themselves from anything having to do with Judaism.⁷

Paul steps in and corrects both parties. To those who wave their Jewish-Christian credentials around, insisting that the Law was the door to Christ, Paul tells them that while the Law was a good thing that guided God's chosen people to see that God's covenant promises are accomplished in Jesus. We are made right with God by Christ's faithfulness, not by completing the homework that was intended to prepare us for the coming Messiah. To those who don't understand the Law, and have little time for God's promises to Abraham, Paul reminds them that while we belong now to Christ, belonging to Christ makes us inheritors to the promises given to Abraham. Gentiles are now Abraham's children, and "heirs according to the promise" (v.29). Gentiles now cast their lot in with a Jewish people largely looked down on in the Roman world.

What neither party could see because they were so busy manufacturing idols for themselves of who they think God is in Christ; so busy taking the Lord's name in vain because they'd been using God for their own purposes and pet projects is that they now belong to one another because they belong to Christ. What they can't understand is that their old identities and projects are secondary to their unity in the Lord Jesus, and that unity transcends race, ethnicity, culture, status, and gender.

Please note here that Paul isn't saying these things are unimportant. Far too often we are quick to erase the differences and pretend to be blind to them because we don't want to take a hard look at how we've allowed those differences to determine how we treat one another. No, those differences still exist. Men are men, and women are women. As Paul addresses slaves in his context, unfortunately they would have to go to work for their masters. Jewish brothers were circumcised, and their hearts burned with a passion for Torah, while Gentiles had to try and make sense of Jesus in light of what they once thought they knew.

The point here, Paul is telling us, is that none of those things rival our shared identity in Christ. We were baptized into him, and we have put him on. Rich, poor, Ethiopian, American, East Asian, tall, short, black, white, brown, Republican, Democrat, Independent, English, Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, or Portuguese speaking, all of us bring our differences to the table so that, as Paul tells us in Ephesians 3:18-19, we might "have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God." If you think you can worship God without your brother or sister with whom you struggle to get along, Paul tells us, think again!

What ought to be at the heart of worship is God's Spirit who takes what used to not fit together, and fits us together so we can reimagine, reimagine, and see anew God's grace for us and for the world as if we were seeing it for the first time. If we gather in the name of Jesus, and hear the Gospel proclaimed, none of us ought to leave having heard what makes us comfortable. Worship of the Lord God is a desperate seeking for his presence, to know him in greater depth, and to be renewed in our hearts and minds.⁸

Now, if I hadn't managed to step on your toes yet, let me apply a little more pressure: what about FPC Bristol do we present or assume or think we know about worshipping the Lord God that has more to do with our preferences than it does what truly honors and worships the Lord? What about us may not make room for others

⁶ Acts 6:1: "Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists [Greeks] complained against the Hebrews [Jewish Christians] because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food." Later in Acts 11, Peter is criticized for eating with the Gentiles: "Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3 saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'" Far from being a champion for the Gentiles, Paul references a failing of Peter in this regard later in Galatians 2:11-14: "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned: 12 for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. 13 And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"

⁷ Take the example of the heretic Valentinus (100 AD) from Carthage. He was nearly elected bishop of Rome, and authored the Gnostic text, *Gospel of Truth*. Despite all its mythic nonsense, what is most striking about the work is how little effort is made to relate the person and work of Jesus to his Jewish origins, the promise to Abraham, Jewish Scripture, etc.

⁸ Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

who see or understand the Lord in a different light? What are we about that might be a stumbling block to a brother or sister for whom we were made to worship and share table? Is it a certain preference for a style of worship? A different kind of tune in which we sing our songs? A certain kind of or emphasis in preaching? Lord forbid, is it a dress code, or being “decent and in order” Presbyterians? Can you worship God well if you struggle to read? Think about it. There are many in our society who struggle with that skill. Does our taking for granted the ability to read create barriers for others to worship God and join in our community?

Worship is about God, not our idols. In fact, worship is about casting down our idols so we can see God through the Lord Jesus. Worship is about our unity as the body of Christ as we are reimagined, renewed in our image as truly human beings regardless of anything else, and conformed to the image of Jesus Christ who gave himself so that we might live. Let’s never forget that. Glory be to God, Amen!



