

God Was in Christ

A Meditation on Faithful and Respectful Evangelizing

Preached by the Rev. Thomas C. Davis, III, Ph.D.

At Hanover Street Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

John 10: 22-30

John 14: 8-11

John 14: 5-7

John 20: 24-30

And finally, John 1: 14, 16-18:

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made God known."

Last Monday night the rabbi and congregants of Congregation Beth Shalom, the Jewish synagogue across the street, hosted about fifty Hanover Church members at a Jewish Passover meal. It was a most joyous and moving occasion. We broke bread together. We sang in Hebrew together. And together we prayed. We participated in this ancient Jewish ceremony not merely to learn more about the Hebrew traditions which underlie our own Christian faith, but to express together our thanksgiving to God, and our dedication to God, despite the religious differences which historically have divided us.

My sermon this morning asks and attempts to answer this question: How was it possible for us to worship with our Jewish neighbors, and feel that that occasion was blessed, that God approved of it and smiled down upon us as we worshiped together; how was it possible for us to do that while also recognizing that our Christian scriptures teach that no one comes to God except through Jesus Christ?

One explanation might be that we were just pretending to worship, being diplomatic, playing nice, that we do not really believe that God accepts non-Christians for who they are, but only as potential Christians. Perhaps we just feigned respect for Jewish ways of worship because we had an ulterior motive, namely, to befriend our Jewish neighbors so that we might perhaps convert some down the road. There certainly are Christian evangelists who think and act that way.

However, my sense of our experience Monday night was that we worshiped genuinely. We came to the Seder not to observe a foreign religious culture

dispassionately, but to participate wholeheartedly in the worship. And, from the comments I have received I judge that we did indeed worship sincerely, that is, without ulterior motives. So I invite you to explore with me this morning how it was theologically possible for us to do that.

In a recent article printed in the "Christian Century" entitled "Faithful and Respectful" Bob Abernathy asks:

How do I remain committed to the truth of my own faith and, at the same time, learn to understand and respect the truths of others? Are there many paths up God's mountain, any one of which will lead to the summit? Is my path better than all the others? Or is mine the only one that goes all the way? Chaim Potok wrote in *The Book of Lights* about two American rabbis, both army chaplains, in Japan during the Korean War. They passed a Japanese man praying devoutly beside a roadside shrine. One rabbi said to the other, 'Do you think our God is listening to that man?' He added, 'If our God is not listening, what do we mean when we say 'God'? And if God is listening, what do we mean when we say 'we'?

Precisely! And the story illustrates that the challenge of being both faithful to one's own religious tradition while also respectful of others' is not a Christian challenge only. As societies all over the globe are becoming more pluralistic, this challenge becomes ever more pressing to all religious people, because if the challenge is not met, the outcome must either be societies where no religious expression is permitted at all, or else, ones where fundamentalist holy wars rage and only the most violent survive.

To Christians the challenge of being both faithful and respectful is particularly pressing, because our faith calls us to make disciples. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 says: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Millions of Christians believe they must try to convert everyone else in order to be true disciples themselves. But how can we do this without disrespecting non-Christians? When the Southern Baptist Convention published a prayer guide to help Baptists convert Jews during their High Holy Days, the Baptists explained that they were simply trying to do what Christ had taught, and that their motivation was the love of neighbor. But Jewish leaders said they could do with less love and more respect! So did the Muslims and Hindus, about whom the Baptists also published conversion guides.

How can Christians obey the call to evangelize without provoking resentment, especially in a world that is growing more and more pluralistic? Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter has part of the answer where he notes that it is not our duty to convert. God converts. Our duty is to proclaim, and leave the outcome in God's hands. But what is it that we should proclaim? That no one can come to God unless he or she becomes a Christian? I don't think that we really believe that, given the way that we participated sincerely in worship with our Jewish neighbors last Monday night. We

are like the rabbis who asked: If we believe that God listens to that foreign worshiper, who are we? What do we really believe?

I think that a satisfactory answer to that question, for Christians who are striving to be both faithful and respectful, is that God was in Christ. You will see why I emphasize the word, "in", in a minute; but let me first point out that this assertion, that God was in Christ, is what principally distinguishes our religion from others. Other great world religions, such as Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism share Christianity's concern with right conduct. Others have similar notions of redemption through sacrifice, but none share the conviction that the One and Almighty God became incarnate, that God became fully present in a human being. This conviction is unique to Christianity.

How can we understand and proclaim this conviction in a way that is both faithful to our Christian experience, while also making room to respect others' experiences of God as well? The answer, I believe, is to tell of our forebears' experience that God was in Christ, emphasizing the "in." What is so important about the "in"? The "in" indicates that God did not become Jesus of Nazareth. If this were the Christian message, there would be nothing to distinguish this idea from the Egyptians' and Greeks' idea that their Pharaohs and emperors were gods. Our Christian scriptures do occasionally speak of Jesus as if he were God, purely and simply, without qualification, as when Thomas is bid by the risen Jesus to touch him, and Thomas remarks, "My Lord and my God!" But even here there is a way of understanding the text which does not imply that Jesus was God, but rather that Thomas felt he was in the presence of God when he was invited to touch Jesus, which is another way of saying that for Thomas, God was in the risen Jesus, the Christ.

Consider another text, "I and the Father are one." Is this a statement about equivalence? Is Jesus saying that there is no distinction between him and God? No. This interpretation doesn't work, considering other remarks Jesus makes in the same Gospel, where he denies equality with God, and says he has come only to do his Father's work. The statement "I and the Father are one," therefore, is not about equivalence. It is about intimacy. It is similar to the Biblical statement that when husband and wife marry, they become one flesh. They are extremely intimate, so we say they have become one. But of course they remain two persons. And so do the first and second persons of the Holy Trinity, God and God's Son. Affirming that God is three-persons-in one does not imply that each person of the Trinity is equivalent to the others. If they were equivalent, there would be no Trinity. The Trinity can be understood only if Jesus and the Holy Spirit are understood as distinct from each other, and not equivalent to God, and in fact, subservient to God. They do God's bidding. The oneness of the Trinity is about intimacy, not equivalence.

Some people object to the doctrine of the Trinity because it is not explicitly set forth in the Bible, and this is true. But neither is any other full-blown teaching about Jesus. All scripture gives us is symbols, metaphors, stories. If we are to make any systematic sense of these, we must use our imagination and construct ideas, such as the Trinity. Even the idea of incarnation is an imaginative construct. But it is not constructed from

thin air. Everything the gospel writers asserted about Jesus' relationship to God and the Holy Spirit's relationship to Jesus was a groping for words to describe their spiritual experiences. They experienced Jesus as God-with-us (Emmanuel). They experienced the presence of Jesus in the Spirit at Pentecost. The disciples did not believe that God had become Jesus. (They were Jewish. Such an idea would have been preposterous and blasphemous to them). However they maintained that they had experienced in Jesus as complete a revelation of God as any human being could possibly have. Very often, when they were in the presence of Jesus they felt that they were in the presence of God. Paul was later to say: "God was in Christ." John puts it this way: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father [another remark about intimacy], he has made God known."

Another way of saying that God was in Christ is that Jesus of Nazareth was the quintessential Spirit-person. The spirit of God was incomparably, intensely present in him. This is certainly a New Testament claim. But making the claim in this fashion does not preclude the possibility that God's spirit may also be powerfully present in other persons who have never heard about Jesus, or else, who have heard, but whose religious tradition connects worshiper to God by another way. Reading about the wisdom and deeds of persons like the Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, or the native American, Chief Seattle, or the Jewish girl-heroine, Anne Frank, I recognize that the spirit of God was powerfully present in them, though they were not Christians. As a Christian, I believe that the experience of God in Christ is very precious. I believe that God-adorers miss something wonderful and immensely valuable by not recognizing God in Christ. In affirming that, am I being disrespectful to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other non-Christians? No, I don't think so. Every devout person believes there is something incomparably precious in his or her own tradition. Otherwise he or she would not stay in it, but rather, espouse another. I can say respectfully to non-Christians: I think you are missing something very precious by not recognizing God in Christ. And they will probably say something similar to me with respect to the sacredness of Torah, or the oneness of Allah, or the reality of the eight fold path. I sincerely do believe that God, the Creator of us all, loves us all, though we do not belong to the same fold. It would seem you must believe this too. Otherwise you could not have worshiped sincerely with our Jewish neighbors last Monday night.

In our secular, increasingly pluralistic society, there is a crying need for Christians who are of this open mind to think through the basic tenets of our faith, so that we can express them in ways that are both faithful to the Biblical witness and respectful of other faith traditions. Our hearts have moved us to reach out and accept others, but our heads don't know yet how to make sense of where our hearts have led us. We need to rethink our faith, so that we can be faithful and respectful proclaimers of the Good News of Jesus Christ. I have started you on this new evangelical journey this morning, challenging you to examine some implications of our central Christian experience that God was in Christ. There is much more theological homework to do. May God give us Holy Spirit, that we may be faithful and respectful in our evangelizing.