

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
October 4, 2009 (World Communion Sunday)
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:10-12
“Personally Speaking”

The group sat contentedly around the fireplace, having shared a meal, stories and some laughs, when someone brought up the topic of religion. A few comments were made about whether religion is still relevant today. One man said, “I asked my elderly father, who is an atheist, why he goes to services every week. He said, ‘My friend Garfinkle goes to talk to God, and I go to talk to Garfinkle.’”¹ The conversation then went to a deeper level when it was asked, “How are we to talk about God in this crazy, modern world?” After a pause, someone suggested that we can best talk about God by naming the moral laws upon which we all agree – like the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Mt 7:12); or its inverse, “Do to no one what you yourself dislike” (Tobit 4:15). It is safest to talk about religion when you limit the conversation to general laws and morality.

Someone disagreed and said that we best talk about God when we describe the universal ways souls are inspired and moved. We should use “spirit language” with others, talking about the common spirit of love, the spirit of creativity, the spirit of passion, hope, and peace that unites us all. That’s the way to talk about faith today. But then the Wise Woman seated in the corner spoke up, slowly yet with conviction. And this is what she said: *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets. But in these days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom God appointed heir of all things and through whom the worlds were created. This Son is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and all things – all things – are sustained by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3)*

In a world of many faiths and many cultures, here was a voice challenging us to talk about God by talking specifically about Jesus Christ, God’s Son. No Golden Rules or vague reflections on spirituality; just the concrete, palpable, troubling story of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ. Every time we have an Inquirers’ Class in which we talk about possible membership in our church, someone almost always says, “I like your church and I believe in God, but I’m not so sure about all this stuff about Jesus – the miracles, the resurrection, his being fully human-fully divine.” Believe me, this is not a new issue. The apostle Paul long ago talked about how the gospel of Christ was troubling to everyone he knew. As he put it, “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks” (I Cor 1:23). For the Jews, God was eternal, mysterious, intangible, and yet Christians professed that God was one with Christ whom we proclaim as a crucified rabbi and Messiah. For the Greeks, God was not a being who feels pain, suffers and dies; yet here again Christians announced that in Christ that is exactly what God experienced out of love for us.

It is true that in almost every Inquirers’ Class, someone says how he or she has trouble with the church’s language about Jesus the Christ. Yet it is also true that for many people, especially our youth and young adults raised in a post-modern world of

skepticism and political correctness, there is a hunger for something palpable and real in our worship today. They've seen too many people come with Garfinkle to church, not to worship God but just to talk with Garfinkle. They've heard too many sermons that are hollow exhortations to fresh deeds of moral action. They've sat through too many messages that use manipulative language hoping to make the listeners feel spiritually energized and upbeat. But what they yearn for is a personal story there at the heart of our faith story. They, like all of us, want more than religious rhetoric. We want a God with a name, with a story, with a beating heart.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways. But now God has spoken to us by a Son, who is the reflection of God's glory, the imprint of God's being, the one through whom the worlds came to be. When the Wise Women and Men first began putting the story of Christ together, they had to create language to describe this God with a beating heart. They knew there is no getting around the fact that the relationship of God in Christ is essentially a mystery, a wonder beyond words. But in approaching that mystery, the poets spoke first – and they spoke about a reflection. Just as you can see your likeness in a mirror, Jesus is the living likeness of God. To see the Holy One, we begin with the face, the features and actions of the living One called Jesus. That's the first step.

Then the artists entered the conversation. They described how you can lightly hammer a metal sheet over a design and then lift off an exact imprint from the original. Jesus was this imprint of God, someone more tangible than a mere reflection. And then the disciples added one more word, a critical word, saying that Jesus was an exact imprint of God's very being. (In Greek, this word is "hypostasis.") This was the closest, richest word they could offer. Jesus was and is the perfect reflection of God; even more, Jesus was and is the exact imprint of God, whose contours and nuances we can perceive; even more, Jesus was and is the same hypostasis, the same being, the same love, the same eternal will as God.

Some may argue that words alone cannot remove the tension between Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus the Christ. Others may argue that our emphasis on this particular story about Jesus is insensitive and inappropriate in a world where there are so many religions and so many faith traditions. Yet here is what I believe. The more we turn Jesus into an ethics teacher, the less we have to talk about with others of faith around the world. The more we reduce Jesus to a spiritual coach, the less substantial will be our talks with people hurting in body and soul around the world.

The problem with Jesus the Christ, the human-divine Son of God, cannot be resolved by running away from it. It can only be resolved by embracing and praying and grappling with it. Because Jesus is not a mental construct. Jesus was and is a real person. So pick your point of entry. This person lived, breathed, walked, and slept. You can eat a meal with this person. You can talk about this person with another person; you personify the categories of faith by telling the story of Jesus.

And yes, it is a difficult story. It comes to us through fireside story hours and yellowed bits of parchment. It comes through the fog of a distant time, involving a distant people in a distant land. It involves a man who lived and taught and healed broken lives. It involves someone who was arrested and betrayed and ended up a statistic jotted down on Roman lists of capital punishment victims. And for many, many people of faith, there was one more chapter to this story.

Long ago God spoke in many and various ways; but in these days God has spoken to us by a Son. Only in the personal is the universal. The inverse is never true.

Today we try out this language, articulating this personal story of Jesus Christ. We sit down at a table and all humanity joins us. We pause long enough to look in one another's eyes – and we remember Jesus is God's reflection. We pass a loaf of bread, but in order to share it, we must tear it. And in handing it to our neighbor, we remember Jesus is God's exact imprint – the bread of life, torn that it might feed us all. And then we drink the cup. Something outside us enters into us. We are not alone. Being is consumed by being. Hypostasis merges with hypostasis – the two become one flesh. Granted, it is more mystical than rational and yet it is true.

No one asks us to understand the mystery of our faith – an eternal God, a loving Spirit, a Savior we call the Christ. All that is asked is that we not run from this story. The way to peace is through it, not around it. Others right beside you, others here and around the world are waiting for you to break the silence by telling the story in your own words. People of other faiths want to hear what gives you life, hope, and peace, not in general terms and Wikipedia essays but in real words and personal stories.

Take the first step today. We will gather at the communion table and say, "Lift up your hearts," to which the response is "We lift them up to the Lord." Do you really? Truly? Literally? Start right there. And discover how much there is to talk about. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

¹ New York Times magazine article, "Is There a Right Way to Pray?", Zev Chafets; September 20, 2009, p. 45.