

"God Has More For You"
First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa
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[Texts: 1 Peter 2:4-10/John 14:1-12]

Every college student who has endured the first course in philosophy has heard: "God is that being greater than which cannot be thought." So goes the classic 'ontological proof,' the proof from being, for God's existence of the twelfth century philosopher-theologian Anselm of Canterbury. Yet another Englishman, hundreds of years later, came closer to dealing with where people really are. Back in the early 1950s New Testament scholar J.B. Philips penned his book, Your God Is Too Small. His point is that many people live with inner dissatisfaction, lack of spiritual fulfillment because they haven't found a God big enough "to account for" life as they understand it. He could be writing today.

Philips point is that the problem is not with God, but with inaccurate and inadequate perceptions of who God is. He identifies twelve inaccurate perceptions, God as: resident policeman, parental hangover, grand old man, meek-and-mild, absolute perfection, heavenly bosom, managing director, second-hand God, perennial grievance, pale Galilean, projected image, and -- my favorite -- God-in-a-box.

This last one, to me, seems the most pervasive misconception of God. The desire to circumscribe, enclose who God is, limit how he can act, how he is to be perceived, and who can perceive him is a natural outgrowth of being human. We like to control our surroundings, it's part of coming to our particular comfort levels. Why should it be any different when it comes to dealing with eternal realities? If we can domesticate plants and animals, even each other, why not God?

The people of Israel had become so accustomed to dealing with God in a certain way that they couldn't conceive of him dealing with them any other way. Even Jesus' own disciples, as we heard in the reading from John this morning, had trouble with what he was telling them. Thomas, who wants his facts straight, protests that they have no idea where Jesus is going -- so how can they follow? Philip just wants to see the Father. But Jesus wants them to understand -- as he wants us to understand -- that God has more for those who love him. That God is more than anything we can conceive.

Jesus seeks to expand the disciples' interpretative viewpoint. As one contemporary theologian has put it, Jesus is the sacrament of the encounter with God. A sacrament is a reality which makes another reality present. Thus Jesus tells Thomas, "I am the way" and Philip, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." He wants them, and us, to understand that God is not far-off, a distant, aloof, disinterested

creator. Rather, God is present to all who seek him, not later but now. The nation of Israel wanted the restoration of the Davidic kingdom – they wanted the glory-days of empire back. “God in his heaven and all right with the world,” as it were. Jesus, however, changes the definition of kingdom.

The kingdom of God is not a place, but a person -- not a what but a who. To encounter Jesus is to encounter the kingdom and to know him is to know salvation. As Augustine would write in his seminal work The City of God:

This, then is the universal way of salvation, that is, granted to all nations by divine mercy, such that whatever men know it or come to know of it none of them can or ought to say: “Why now?” “Why so late” For the plan of he who procures it for us is not grasped by our intelligence. . . This, I say, is the universal way of salvation for all believers, in accord with what the faithful Abraham heard from the divine oracle: “In your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing” (Gen. 22:18). . . This is the universal way of which a holy prophecy said: “May God have pity on us and bless us; may he let his face shine upon us. So may your way be known upon earth; among all nations your salvation” (Ps. 66:2-3). . . This is the universal way which long before had been announced: “In days to come, the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it: many peoples shall come and say: ‘Come let us climb the Lord’s mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in his ways and we may walk in his paths.’ For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:2-3). It is not the way of only one people, but of all nations: the law of the Lord and his word do not dwell in Zion and Jerusalem; they are spread throughout the universe. . . This is the universal way of the soul’s deliverance!”¹

The apostle Peter describes the means by which this universal way is offered to the world when he talks about the church. Peter says that God takes those who follow and gathers them to become the ‘body of Christ.’ So the church, like the kingdom of God, is not a place but persons, not a building but a living reality – “living stones.” Thus the sixteenth century Congregationalist statement of faith given at Savoy could talk about the church as a universal reality being something both invisible and visible.² That which makes it universal -- the faith professed by believers -- is invisible, the bodies of believers -- the gathered communities -- which makes it present is visible. It’s like the visiting king who came to view the famed walls of Sparta and found none. He asked the Spartan king, “Where are your famous city walls?” The Spartan pointed to the assembled army and the citizens walking about and said, “Here are Sparta’s walls --

¹Augustine, City of God, book 10, chapter 32, trans. Marcus Dodds, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 2, Philip Schall, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 203.

²cf. ‘The Savoy Declaration,’ chapter 26 “Of the Church” in The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, Williston Walker, ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1969), pp. 395-6.

each person is a brick." Where is the church? Here, and here, and here. Where is 'the way'? Here, and here, and here.

God continues his encounter in the living reality of his faithful people and through us offers more to the world. The concept of the 'priesthood of all believers' was articulated by Peter, but recovered in the Reformation. The word 'priest' in Latin is 'pontifex' and literally means 'bridge-builder.' The priest builds the bridge between the divine and human -- we Christians are to be a "royal priesthood." Those who come to know us should come to know God in Christ through us -- a bridge should be built. And, this implies a 'connectedness,' a sense of community which must be worked at continually and never limited to only our local fellowship.

The 'God-in-a-box' syndrome rears its head over-and-over in the history of Christianity (just like limiting the concept of priesthood only to one class of people -- rather than all believers). It is an attempt to limit the experience of faith. It was this restriction of what the church was to be that led to the formation of the Puritan movement in the Church of England and the development of the Congregational Way. The Pilgrims, especially, wanted the freedom to follow an informed conscience (and I want to place special stress on the modifier 'informed' -- conscience is not a question of 'feelings,' but is a reasoned response, a so-called "gut-level" response could just be a case of indigestion!). Their pastor, John Robinson, told them: "The custom of the Church is but the custom of men; the sentence of the fathers but the opinion of men. . .so was their testimony but human. . .we are therefore to beware that we neither wrong ourselves by credulity nor others by unjust suspicion."³ As they were preparing to embark for their journey to America Robinson would tell the Pilgrims: "The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth our of His holy Word." What was he trying to teach his people? Be tolerant. Be open. Don't make God smaller than He is. But truth is that the very word 'Puritan' conjures up all sorts of connotations of narrowness and restricted thought. Though I believe that conception is dead wrong. If you read the writings and study the history one discovers that there was very little of the 'puritanical' about the Puritans. It's just one more reason why we have to know our roots.

"God has more light yet to break forth from His holy Word." I believe that. I also believe that those who benefit from that light are to then "proclaim his wonderful deeds." How? First, by living the experience -- letting the light shine, if you will. At the root of this living is the experience of charity and tolerance. The wonderful thing

³cf, Marion L. Starkey, The Congregational Way (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 22.

about being a Christian should be that we can differ in our interpretation of how the faith is to be expressed and still love each other. History teaches us that Christians have never agreed on every point -- you'll find doctrinal disputes in the pages of the Scriptures. It also teaches us that various groups have constantly tried to assert that there is only "one true church" -- normally theirs. The unfortunate result has been that our theological wrangles have led to animosity and disrespect that doesn't go far in making Jesus' presence comfortable -- or perhaps even possible! Believers should be free to disagree and to do so knowing that they will be respected, regardless. One of my favorite films, "The Quiet Man," illustrates this, I think. / There's a great fight scene, with a donnybrook raging up and down the village. A bystander taps one of the pugilists on the shoulder saying, "Is this a private fight or can anyone be joining in?" His response is a rap on the head. He says, "Thanks!" and dives in! So it is with discussion of the faith, with a difference -- we fight with charity. While it is the charity of Christ that compels us, it is also the force that unites us -- even in our diversity.

We proclaim God's wondrous deeds, too, when we continue to seek the truth. When we approach the faith with healthy intellectual curiosity that is not satisfied with mediocrity we honor the God who made us -- and reflect some of the image he placed in us. As believers we should know better than to think that we "know it all." There is still more light -- we have to seek it. This is what our confirmands have learned -- I hope -- in their two year Covenant Class journey. That our knowledge of God's goodness is always just beginning. As I encouraged them so I encourage you, to read, to think, to pray, to become a life-long learner. We would never consider relying on the knowledge we received in grade school as a means to earn a living now. Why have that attitude when it comes to the way in which we relate to God?

So, I think we can safely say, that it is not God who is too small. Only our conception. "The Lord hath more truth and light" -- if God has more, don't settle for less.