

## Jesus Christ

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

24 September 2023

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Texts: Philippians 2:5-11

*“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”*

~ Philippians 2:5-7

## Prayer

**God-with-us,**

**Startle us with your truth –**

**Unteach us what is bad**

**And teach us to give our hearts only to what is good,**

**Hopeful, life-giving and true. Amen**

God. Every time we hear this short noun in the English lexicon, the word draws out an immediate abundance of ideas, images, beliefs, and emotions that are usually very precious, cherished, respected and sacred to each one of us.

God. If you have a philosophical mind, you may think of God as the “*Ultimate Reality*” in the universe, the “*Unmoved Mover*,” or the “*Ground of Being*.” In church pews, it is still common to associate God with the very traditional and widely accepted notions defined by the 3 big “O’s” – God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. God is all-powerful and always in control. God is all-knowing and because God is everywhere, God is always present and sees everything. There is a whole generation of Christians who grew up singing a Sunday school song that always makes me cringe at the thought of God as the Father who keeps tabs on our every move – ***“O be careful little eyes what you see... O be careful little ears what you hear... O be careful little tongue what you say... O be careful little hands what you do... O be careful little feet where you go... For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful, be careful, be careful.”*** Every time I hear this song, I want to repeat Job’s words, ***“Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle? If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?”***<sup>1</sup>

There are millions of die-hard trinitarians that define God as a beautiful union of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who are engaged in an eternal perichoretic dance. One of my friends in seminary caused a heated quarrel in the classroom after expressing her opinion about the concept of the Trinity. She said the Early Church Fathers turned the idea of the Triune God into the ultimate gay bar scene where there is only space for male love and women are completely unnecessary. [That will make a fun topic for the sermon talk-back!]

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The Bible says that God is love,<sup>2</sup> God is spirit,<sup>3</sup> God is light,<sup>4</sup> God is the “***I Am who I Am***,”<sup>5</sup> God is the first and the last,<sup>6</sup> God is Father,<sup>7</sup> but the popular image of God as an old white man with a long beard sitting on a throne up in heaven still lingers. Atheists, of course, declare that God is nothing more than a figment of our imagination. Carl Sagan is well-known for his view of the God of the Gaps. Sagan was convinced that as science advances and explains the great mysteries of the universe, there will be less and less space for this God of the Gaps, which Sagan dismissed as the do-nothing-deity that is assigned responsibility for what humanity does not yet understand.<sup>8</sup> And there are people who are cocksure in their belief that God thinks, looks, sounds and acts exact like them. Anne Lamott noted in her quintessential cheeky and insightful manner that “***You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image, when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.***”<sup>9</sup>

In the Letter to the Philippians, Paul said that even though Christ was equal with God, he emptied himself and chose to become one of us, but in Genesis, Eve and Adam, standing in for the human race, do the very opposite: they jumped at the opportunity to be “***like God, knowing good and evil.***”<sup>10</sup> And if we are honest, we will acknowledge that in a society with an oversized sense of entitlement like ours, there are many who behave and walk around as if they were gods, deserving of adulation and veneration. One of my colleagues recently said that a member of his affluent suburban church told him very angrily on the way out of the sanctuary that he did not like the worship service at all that morning. This colleague, who was not feeling particularly gracious that day, looked at the man and said, “***It’s okay. We’re not here to worship you!***”

The images and ideas we have of God matter, or at least, they should matter, because what you believe or don’t believe about God should affect, touch, shape, and transform the very core of your being. Some of us, especially in churches labeled “progressive,” tend to have the kind of relationship with God that poet Mary Oliver captured so well in her poem “*Mysteries, Yes*.”<sup>11</sup>

***“Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous  
to be understood...  
Let me keep my distance, always, from those  
who think they have the answers.  
Let me keep company always with those who say  
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment,  
and bow their heads.”***

There are certainly times when the only right attitude before the mystery of God is silence, perhaps holy laughter, and no doubt bowed heads. I visited a tiny church in a small town in Brazil once and up behind the pulpit in large letters on the wall were written the words from the prophet Habakkuk, “***the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.***”<sup>12</sup> But there is more to our relationship with God than mystery and silence. Martin Luther’s Large Catechism asks a fundamental question that every

Christian must ask and answer: ***“What does it mean to have a god? or, what is God?”*** It’s a catechism so, of course, it gives us an ***“Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe Him from the [whole] heart... That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.”***<sup>13</sup> Our real god is the idea, the ideology, the belief system, the goal, the institution, the thing, the person to which we give our whole heart and in which we place our trust. Who and what you love and trust with all your mind, heart, energy, and soul, above everything and everyone else, is the god that has your ultimate loyalty and true devotion. Your images of and your beliefs about the god you love and trust with every fiber of your being have profound implications for your life and measurable consequences for the Earth and everything on the planet.

Now for those of you who are here today, and this is one of the good reasons to come to church, I have great news. In the Christian tradition, we know who God is, what God wants and what God is doing in and through our lives and in the world. I know this sounds presumptuous, overconfident, and even flat-out arrogant, but at the heart of our faith lies this world-shaking, mind-blowing, and awe-inspiring claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the human face of God.<sup>14</sup> Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote in his book on the Apostles’ Creed that in the life of Jesus, 2000 years ago, those who were closest to him saw the key to God’s nature and intentions. It is because of Jesus that we grasp the image of God as loving, self-giving, forgiving and life-affirming. I love how Rowan Williams writes about Jesus, ***“Here is a human life so shot through with the purposes of God, so transparent to the actions of God, that people speak of [Jesus’ life] as God’s life ‘translated’ into another medium.”***<sup>15</sup> ***“In other words, Christians approach Jesus now as though he were completely with God, associated with God, able to do what God does, and correctly addressed as if he were God.”***<sup>16</sup> In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul described Jesus as ***“the visible image of the invisible God.”***<sup>17</sup> And, my friends, here is the most beautiful and powerful image of God that Christianity offers to humankind, which Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Philippians: ***“This is how you should think among yourselves – with the mind you have because you belong to the Messiah, Jesus: Who, though in God’s form, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped or exploited. Instead, Jesus emptied himself, taking the low position of a servant, being born in the likeness of humans... And he humbled himself, and became obedient even to death, yes, even the death on the cross.”***

Far too many Christians, especially in Evangelical circles, hold on to an understanding of the Christian story, which became dominant in the Middle Ages, that makes the cross the sole purpose of Jesus’ life. Behind this approach to the story of Jesus is the image of a God who cannot forgive unless the blood of the perfect, sinless Son is spilled to placate God’s wrath. Jesus dies on the cross and sheds his blood as a human sacrifice offered for the sins of the world. We are all familiar with the words of that old gospel hymn:

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***“Just as I am, and waiting not  
to rid my soul of one dark blot,  
to thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”***<sup>18</sup>

Dallas Willard, a professor of philosophy who was passionate about Christian spiritual formation, called these Christians who are obsessed with Jesus’ blood, “**vampire Christians.**” Willard went so far as to call this expression of the Christian faith - heretical, because it creates a distortion of the essence of the Gospel. It makes people practice a very passive Christian faith. All you need is a little bit of the blood of Jesus to be forgiven, saved and get your ticket to heaven.<sup>19</sup>

There is also the other extreme among post-modern Christians who refuse to use the language of Jesus’ blood and sacrifice at all in worship. The temptation in liberal-learning Christianity is always to minimize the violence of the crucifixion and focus instead on a sanitized theology of cross in which Jesus’ death reveals the depth of God’s love. Through Christ, God participates in our pain, not by taking it away, but by sharing it with us and ultimately giving us a new hope and a new life. But there was a young, naked Jewish man hanging on the Roman cross. His innocent blood was shed. The Apostle Paul made a point to emphasize this reality in his message to the church in Philippi: “**he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.**” In other words, Jesus did suffer and did die on the cross, but not to appease the wrath of a blood-thirsty God or to help us get through tough times. Jesus lived his entire life listening attentively to God – this is the meaning of the word “obedience” in Latin: to listen, to give ear, to pay attention very closely. Jesus was adamant in his commitment to pay attention to God’s will and hopes and dreams for humankind. He was killed because he refused to conform to the injustice, hatred, cruelty and violence created and sustained by the hostilities and divisions of human civilization. Jesus of Nazareth gave his whole heart to this God who does not like the dividing walls we place between each other. The late Rev. William Sloane Coffin, once said, “**Love measures our stature: the more we love, the bigger we are. There is no smaller package in all the world than that of a man all wrapped up in himself.**”<sup>20</sup> Jesus was filled and overflowing with God’s love, which made him a real threat to the puny and jumpy powers of this world that thrive on fear, individualism, arrogance, conflict, exploitation, and untrammelled self-interest. Jesus emptied himself. He wouldn’t use his equality with God to overpower and force humankind into submission. Jesus, the Son of the Living God,<sup>21</sup> was big enough to humble himself, love humankind, and die on the cross. He showed those who would follow him that humble self-giving as an act of love is what God looks like and what God hopes those who worship him will practice and live.

I spent most of this past week reflecting on this image of a self-giving God, which is so central to our faith. To live the Christian life, we have to be willing to give ourselves away, fully aware that this daring act of faith, love and obedience to God may hurt us, may cause our hearts to be broken, and may bring us to our own cross. Jesus emptied himself

and became one of us not only to show that God understands our brokenness, feels our pain and suffers in solidarity with us; Jesus took on our humanness and lived a sinless life to help all of us see that it is possible to be fully human and listen attentively to God. It is possible to be human and break down the dividing walls of bitterness, anger, aggression, self-centeredness, and enmity that rob us of peace. When we say that Jesus was sinless, we are not saying that he was different from every other human being, somehow more perfect, more righteous, more whole or more holy. What the Christian tradition means by “sinless” is simply that Jesus was very intentional about moving toward God and toward the neighbor with unclouded vision and a heart ready to embrace, forgive, accept, and love. Jesus was not superhuman; **“Jesus was rightly human.”**<sup>22</sup> The Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen said, **“Jesus Christ reveals to us that our true identity is not to be found on the edges of our existence where we can brag about our specialties, but in the center where we can recognize our basic human sameness and discover each other as brothers and sisters, children of the same God... The great mystery of revelation is indeed that Jesus Christ did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself and became as we are. He revealed himself not in being different from us but in being one with us.”**<sup>23</sup> It is not the cross or the blood that bring us closer to God, but Jesus’ self-giving, his willingness to be intimately and actively involved with humankind, his courage to pour out God’s love into our hearts, his readiness to share his life with the world, and his obedience to God above all else.

For you and me and all Christians, God is Christlike and Jesus’ humble self-emptying, self-giving, and his outpouring of selfless love are the answer to the question: Who is God?<sup>24</sup> Jesus is our definition of the mystery of God. Jesus makes visible God’s essence, God’s purposes, God’s will, and God’s actions to the Church. Jesus gives us an image of God that calls on all Jesus-followers to make our obedience to God known, noticeable and unmistakable through our very intentional self-giving behavior. As British theologian N.T. Wright puts it, in the Christian tradition, **“we start from Jesus and rethink our whole picture of God around him.”**<sup>25</sup>

I imagine that you are here this morning because deep within you there is a desire, a real longing to live your life on the basis of your most cherished, most beloved, and most precious image of God. And I hope that today, you remember that you and I along with millions of Christians around the world make the bold claim that Jesus Christ, the One who humbly emptied himself to meet us where we are, is our Lord and we are here because we want to follow him, to give him our whole hearts, and place our trust in him. Remember that we believe in a God who spoke the universe into being out of pure love and who comes to us in the beauty and wonder of creation, but especially through Christ. Last Sunday, the story of creation in Genesis 1 declared unapologetically that God graciously put God’s image in each human being and, today, our Scriptures remind us that God became fully visible in the human being we call our Lord Jesus Christ. And, friends, if we are serious about having the same mind that was in our Lord, I pray that we may have the strength to humbly empty ourselves of everything that divide us, so we may recognize our

common humanity in each other and let Christ's self-giving define our life together and how we will live in the world.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Job 7:19-20.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 4:8

<sup>3</sup> John 4:24.

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 1:5.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 3:14.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 44:6.

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2:11.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Sagan in The Varieties of Scientific Experience, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Lamott in Bird by Bird : Some Instructions on Writing and Life, p. 21 [Kindle Edition]

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 3:5.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Oliver in Evidence, "Mysteries, Yes," p. 62 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>12</sup> Habakkuk 2:20.

<sup>13</sup> The Large Catechism by Martin Luther, Project Wittenberg, III, Part First, The First Commandment, [<https://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/catechism/web/cat-03.html>].

<sup>14</sup> II Corinthians 4:6.

<sup>15</sup> Rowan Williams in Tokens of Trust, p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> Colossians 1:15 [The Living Translation].

<sup>18</sup> "Just as I Am," written by Charlotte Eliot in 1834.

<sup>19</sup> Dallas Willard. Published in RENOVARE Perspective, Vol. V, No. 4, October 1995. First published in a Biola University bulletin, "Why Bother with Discipleship?" [<https://dwillard.org/articles/why-bother-with-discipleship>].

<sup>20</sup> William Sloane Coffin in The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: Amo, Ergo Sum, Vol. 1, p. 405.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 16:16.

<sup>22</sup> Dorothy & Gabriel Fackre in Christian Basics: A Primer for Pilgrims, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Henri Nouwen in Community, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> I am basing this thought on the phrase associated with two Anglican thinkers Michael Ramsey and John V. Taylor, which Rowan Williams quotes in in Tokens of Trust, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> N.T. Wright in Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters, p. 104.