

“The Unmasking of God”

Colossians 1:11-20

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It’s impossible to turn on the news without hearing multiple reports on how the sudden resurgence of the new and more deadly strain of covid—the Delta variant—is forcing those areas where the rates of infection are particularly acute to don their medical masks once again- and just when we thought we were finally all finished with them. Deferring to the recommendations of both the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control, school children, hospital workers, and government employees are being mandated to put them back on out of concern for people’s safety. Meanwhile, the move has sparked a backlash—sometimes quite a VIOLENT one--among those who regard such a regulation as a restriction upon their personal liberty. Who would have thought that the covering of one’s mouth by such a small piece of paper or cloth material in the interest of saving lives could spark such outrage.

But masks are much more than a means for helping reduce the spread of an infectious disease. People will don masks for an altogether different reason, such as when they want to conceal or disguise themselves. To keep from being recognized, thieves will don masks when attempting to rob a bank, while others who want to improve their looks or even attempt to assume another identity will undergo plastic surgery on portions of their face- both forms of masking.

But then there are masks which are not just physical in nature. Many of us suffer from such a poor self-image, we will don a MENTAL or EMOTIONAL mask in an effort to become somebody else- ANYONE else other than who we REALLY are. We brag about our jobs, our income, or our level of education in order to convey the impression we are much more important than we may be, or we’ll fill our closets with all the latest fashions because we have such a negative view of our own bodies, we think we have to disguise it under the most stylish clothing when in reality they’re nothing more than masks serving as protective mechanisms to help preserve our fragile egos. For instance, the late Tammy Faye Bakker, wife of the discredited evangelist Jim Bakker, would wear so MUCH makeup that her face literally BECAME a mask. This led her to become a standing joke on many a late night talk show. Once asked by a reporter how long it took her to apply her trademark makeup, she replied, “Five minutes. It goes real fast when you use a paintbrush.” She once confessed that she never left her house without all her makeup on because she didn’t want people to see what she REALLY looked like underneath. How sad is THAT!

On the other hand, when we say that a person does NOT wear a mask, it is meant to be a compliment for it implies one who is without guile; someone who can be open and honest with others without having anything to hide. Well my sermon this morning concerns one who REFUSED to wear any masks WHATSOEVER, one who not only SPOKE the truth, but EMBODIED the truth in everything he said and did. He claimed that he came to reveal ANOTHER- his Heavenly Father, and this he could ONLY have accomplished if he was OPEN and HONEST, one who was AUTHENTICALLY REAL as no other human being before or since.

Now this morning's lesson comes from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians. It was NOT originally addressed to unbelievers to convert them to Christianity but to BELIEVERS, and it was intended to encourage them to live according to the gospel concerning Jesus Christ which they'd already received. Apparently, there was a heresy being circulated throughout the church that attacked the unique supremacy of Christ, one that said Jesus was NOT the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." To counter this false teaching, he asserts here, more than he does in any of his other writings, how Christ is co-equal with God and the perfect representation of his person and will. Had this heresy been left to take root and continue unchallenged, it might well have led to the destruction of the Christian faith.

With verses 15-20, he quotes what was actually part of a hymn sung by the early church extolling Christ as the creating and redeeming Lord over all creation. He was before anything that was created and in him, all things are held together. He is the head of the body--the Church--and the first-born of many brothers and sisters who comprise his church. His purpose in coming in the FIRST place was to reconcile a fallen world, for healing the breach and overcoming the chasm that existed between God and man. Christ accomplished this through the blood of the cross, through his personal sacrifice on behalf of a broken and estranged world.

Paul emphasizes here how Christ was "the image of the invisible God" and that in him "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." What he was saying is that amid the many images we have of God, both biblical or imagined, there IS one that expressly reveals the true character and personality of God. Where all others just POINT to God, that is, merely intimating or suggesting the divine, the image of Jesus Christ REVEALS God IN ALL HIS ENTIRETY and that includes God's heart, God's will, and God's feelings. For the great Apostle, CHRIST ALONE provides for us the one infallible and perfect image of God. In other words, if we could somehow take this infinite, immeasurable Spirit we call God and condense him to human scale and proportion, God would be perfectly represented in the nature, actions, and words of Jesus of Nazareth- the fullness of God in human form, a divine heart with a human face.

But by "likeness" or "image," Paul doesn't just mean that Christ bears a RESEMBLANCE or SIMILARITY to God; Jesus doesn't just POINT to God like all other images. In v.15, The Greek word he uses is "eikon" which communicates the idea that Christ PARTICIPATES IN AND WITH the nature of God- not merely copying, but VISIBLY MANIFESTING AND PERFECTLY REVEALING GOD IN HUMAN FORM. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul talks about "the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God's own being." By virtue of his unique and personal relationship to God, Jesus tells his followers in the Gospel of John, "The Father and I are one" (10:30), and "Whosoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). The fact is that if one would know the one, true God, he or she must look to Jesus who perfectly represents God in a form which any one of us can see and know and understand.

Paul was wise enough to understand how our image of God ultimately influences the way we RELATE TO and RESPOND TO God. For instance, in Jesus' Parable of the Talents, the servant buries his talents in the ground rather than wisely investing them like the other two. He does this because, as he says, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Because his image of his Master was that of a ruthless, vengeful tyrant who

demanded from his workers more than they were capable of giving, the servant fearfully buried his allotted funds to preserve it rather than take the risk of losing it.

This morning, I want to challenge you with this question: “What is YOUR image of God?” The fact is we all retain different images of the Divine, many of which are nothing more than caricatures and childish images we learned as children and have never grown out of. Many years ago, J.B. Phillips in his classic book *Your God Is Too Small* identified some of them—images such as God as “RESIDENT POLICEMAN,” where God is seen as a stern judge ready to condemn one for the slightest infraction; or God as “PARENTAL HANGOVER,” that is, when God takes on the image of one’s earthly father (or even mother). He said some see God as a “GRAND OLD MAN,” the white-headed geriatric seated on a gold throne; or God as “PURE LOVE,” that is, as a saccharine, syrupy, sentimental lover who never judges, never becomes critical, but who just “loves”—everything and everyone. There is the image of God as “REASON” or “ENERGY” or “PURE MIND”—the god worshiped by the scientist and philosopher; the image of God as “Nature”—the deity worshiped by the artists and poets; and the image of God as the “NATION-STATE” such as the Nazis promulgated in the 1930’s.

The fact is that we are only limited by our imagination as to the number or kinds of images we have attributed to God with most of them being little more than projections of our own feelings, wishes, and desires rather than images that God provides for us in his Word—the Bible. Such were the gods of the Greeks and the Romans—little more than human beings with their same human faults and propensities. The result is that we develop an understanding of God based on our own fantasies, a God fashioned in our OWN image than the image of the One who has called us to worship, love, and serve him. This is why in the Ten Commandments, the Jews were prohibited from ever making for themselves “any graven image of God, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”(Ex.20:4)—lest they lapse into the same insidious idolatry that characterized the REST of the world.

Throughout human history, our understanding of God has continued to change. There was a time when God was almost universally imagined to be a spirit which dwelt in a river, or a tree, or a mountain. To ancient man, God was often viewed as angry or vindictive and so sacrifices were made—even involving other human beings—to appease his anger or to earn his favor or to procure his blessing. However, all that changed when Jesus Christ entered our world. Sacrifices no longer had to be made because he HIMSELF had become the FINAL, the ULTIMATE, and the ETERNAL sacrifice. He was the “Lamb of God” who by his death on a cross took away the sins of the world. By laying down his life on our behalf, all those barriers which once prohibited us from enjoying a loving and dynamic union with God were once and for all swept aside, and now we could enjoy the same intimate relationship with the Father that JESUS HIMSELF had.

But not only has our image of God changed and evolved throughout human history, our image of God no less changes and evolves during our own LIFETIMES. I’ll give you an example using our own parents. When I was young, like most children, I thought of my dad as a kind of “superman.” Back then, I would have told you that he was the strongest, wisest, most intelligent man on the face of the planet. There is a story of a father who sat on the beach one holiday with his young son just as the sun was going down. He pointed to it dramatically and said, “Going...going...gone!” And the sun disappeared from view. With the great faith that

young children often have in their fathers, the child demanded with all expectancy, "Do it again, Daddy! Do it AGAIN!" We all have that kind of faith in our parents when we're young, don't we. However, as I grew up, I began to see that he was human just like myself and thus limited in every way as everyone else. This becomes ESPECIALLY clear to us when WE became parents OURSELVES. Had we retained that image of our mothers and fathers as all-wise, all-knowing, and all-powerful into adulthood, people would have considered us silly or immature or even questioned our mental stability- and RIGHTLY SO.

The reality is that as our view of our PARENTS changes over time, so does our image of GOD. It changes because WE change, and the more we know about ourselves and the world, the greater and deeper our perspective of who God is and how God operates becomes. The Apostle Paul says as much at the end of 1 Corinthians 13, the famous "love chapter," when he tells the Corinthian Christians, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways." If the goal of the Christian life is foremost one of "maturity," that is, the growth and expansion of our heart, of our minds, our sympathies, our compassion, our commitments, then only to the extent that we find these areas of our lives enlarging and deepening can we in any way say we are growing into what it is Christ would have us become, which is, a more perfect representation of himself in the world.

Some of you may remember the Will Ferrell comedy *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. Ferrell plays the part of a bumbling NASCAR racer named Ricky Bobby who in one scene is sitting down with his family and best friend Cal for a dinner of Domino's Pizza, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Taco Bell. However, before they eat, Ricky has everyone bow their heads while he leads them in grace. He begins his prayer, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus." He then proceeds to thank baby Jesus for various blessings, including his "red-hot smoking wife, Carley." As he prays, he continues to repeat the phrase "Dear Lord Baby Jesus."

Carley interrupts him and says, "You know, Sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby." Ricky Bobby replies, "I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace. When YOU say grace, you can say it to grown-up Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want." Ricky Bobby continues his prayer, "Dear tiny Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers, with your tiny balled-up fists." His father-in-law angrily interrupts, "He was a man. He had a beard!" Ricky Bobby snaps back, "Listen, I'm saying grace, and I like the Christmas version best!"

Ignoring the conflict between the two men, Ricky Bobby's best friend Cal says, "I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo T-shirt. It says like, I want to be formal, but I'm here to party too." One of Ricky Bobby's sons says, "I like to picture Jesus as a Ninja, fighting off the evil samurai." Cal then adds, "I like to think of Jesus with giant eagle wings and singing lead vocals for Lynyrd Skynyrd with an angel band."

Ricky Bobby returns to his prayer, saying, "Dear eight-pound, six-ounce, newborn infant Jesus, who does not even know a word yet—little infant, so cuddly but still omnipotent." He then thanks baby Jesus for all his NASCAR victories and the millions in prize money he has won. He concludes grace by saying, "Thank you for all your power and grace, dear Baby God. Amen." Immediately after the prayer, Cal says, "That was one heck of a grace, man! You nailed that like a split hog!"

Of course, the scene is completely ridiculous and yet, as silly as it may be, I can't help but notice an important truth here. And that is that our spiritual lives suffer because many of us continue to cling to images of God and even of Jesus himself which we may have learned as children in Sunday School but yet have never progressed from or moved beyond. I've talked to enough church people in my life to know that for many Christians, their image of Jesus, like Ricky Bobby, never gets beyond one that makes them feel good or comfortable. For some, it is, like Ricky Bobby, the image of the INFANT JESUS, sucking his thumb in the manger, that holds their attention, one they find to be so peaceful and completely non-threatening. For some, it is Jesus, the GOOD SHEPHERD, watching over his wayward sheep that they find most meaningful. There are persons for whom Jesus as PROPHET, as the one who courageously confronts the unjust powers of this world in the name of righteousness, who holds the greatest allure, while for others, it is the SUFFERING SERVANT, hanging from a cross, pardoning his enemies for their actions, that speaks most powerfully. Now EACH of these are important to the church and mustn't be discounted. But according to the Apostle Paul, the image of Christ as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" as shown in Colossians 1 remains the highest, the noblest, and the most complete image of Christ we can possibly have. In fact, the early church found it to be SO inspiring that they could not think about it without turning it into a hymn and offering up praise and adoration to him through it.

In our New Testament lesson for this morning, Jesus is referred to as the firstborn of all creation through whom all things in heaven and on earth were created, that he was before all things and--in him--all things are held together. In the Gospel of John, we are told that "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." (John 1:3) The Epistle to the Hebrews says that Christ was "appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world," (Heb. 1:2) and in Revelation, he is called "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22:13) For Paul, this expression is the highest evolution of our faith and the noblest and most glorious title one can possibly ascribe to him, and yet our Lord is not SO great that he is completely removed from us and our problems in life; he is not SO exalted that he can no longer sense our tears and fears or feel our pain as he once had- he remains Immanuel or "God with us" in every way.

Our Colossians text is important because in it, St. Paul is saying that for all the images which one can employ to help us understand and relate to God, there is none MORE DEFINITIVE and TRUSTWORTHY than THIS one; it is the highest and greatest image of God that a Christian can possibly conceive- Christ, the creator and head of all things IN whom all things exist and THROUGH whom all things are held together. And if we continue to think of him as the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" and hold THIS image close to our heart and conduct our lives on the basis of it, not only will we see our faith increase and deepen over time, but we will find that, like those early Christians, it is not long before we TOO break out in song and giving him the praise and honor he so rightly deserves. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, thank you for revealing yourself through your Son Jesus Christ. Thank you that because he existed and walked among us, we cannot say we do not know who you are or what you would expect from us. May he continue to be a model and pattern as to how we should conduct our OWN lives- through his life of compassion and humility and peace. In his name we pray. Amen.*