

Christianity in A New Age
Series 1: Pilgrim's Progress
Part 2: How does Jesus guide us on our journey?
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I. The Holy Other - Ephesians 1:1-10

Last week we spent some time experiencing how scripture itself is a guide for us on our journey in relationship with ourselves, with each other and with God. This week we will explore, through St Paul's experience, how Jesus is also a guide for us on this relational journey with all that is.

The only thing Paul knows about God as an apostle of Christ is what he gathers from the ministry of Jesus, whom he has never actually met. And Paul is speaking to a group of people in Ephesus who are trying to understand their relationship to a God they do not know, understand, or even really experience much of the time. To be sure, this God is wholly other than us, God's creation, but Paul having had a spiritual experience of Jesus, is trying to describe God's desire for a relationship between the Creator and the created. It all seems rather complicated and confusing at times, but that's how it is trying to describe something that is mystery in the world, right?

Paul's experience of Jesus came only after the resurrection. Remember, Paul, who was then known as Saul, was the Jew who was sent out by the leaders in Jerusalem to round up all the followers of Jesus and either kill them or bring them back to Jerusalem as prisoners for trial. It was on his way to a raid in Damascus that he was struck by lightning, blinding him for three days, when he heard the voice of Jesus the Christ calling him to end his persecution of those who followed the teachings of Jesus and instead become an evangelist for the faith.

For Paul, Jesus was always the Christ, the one with God from the beginning, when God created the world and placed God's desire for relationship within that creation. Jesus the Christ was the one sent by God to reveal this desire of God to creation so that all of the world may be redeemed, or gathered in right relationship with God, the Creator of us all. Paul says that he is *an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God* and that God *blesses us in Christ*, meaning that God's very presence with us is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is not to say that Jesus is the only way into relationship with God, but that Jesus reveals God's desire to be in relationship with us.

God as Creator is distinct from creation. God is wholly other. But at the same time, God has created in us the deep desire God feels to be connected with us. This desire is in each of us as a yearning to connect with our Creator. Jesus in his life and ministry is constantly calling us to bring forth that within us that yearns to be with God, as God is yearning to be in relationship with us. Paul tells us *God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love. God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's will, to the praise of God's glorious grace that God freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*

Paul experienced Christ Jesus as that which calls forth in us that longing for connection to the Other. And Jesus's life and ministry reveals to us a God who longs for us, and all of creation, as we seek to understand that longing in ourselves. Paul experiences this longing himself because of his experience with Jesus on the road to Damascus. And now Paul spends his own life and ministry sharing this longing so that others may experience God as he does through Christ Jesus. Paul writes: *With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of God's will, according to God's good pleasure that God set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in God, things in heaven and things on earth.*

The deepest desire of God, revealed through Christ Jesus is to gather up all things in God. Jesus does not make the gathering possible, but rather reveals to us the plan and desire of God's will for us. For us Christians we know God's will through this revelation in Christ. But for other faiths God is revealed through different means. For instance, in Judaism, God's yearning for relationship is spoken through the *Torah* and the commandments that set the framework of our relationships with God and with each other. And for Islam, "God the Merciful" (thus our redeemer) is God's second most popular name.

In light of this revelation of God through Christ Jesus, we are aware of God's plan to gather all of us in God. In this awareness we are able to see, in a new way, the activity of God happening all around us, all the time, as God goes about this gathering. Every minute of every day God is actively bringing all of creation into Godself. The fullness of time is every present moment. It's happening all the time, and in many and various ways. Paul says we are *destined for adoption as God's children*. Though God is wholly other we are God's children and thus inheritors of this eternal gathering, where we come together in our great diversity, *holy and blameless before God in love*.

God is Other than us. Yet it is our diversity in the community of God that heaven is made of. In his book with Mike Morrell, Father Richard Rohr describes what he calls the "Delight of Diversity," *Goodness isn't sameness. Goodness, to be goodness, needs contrast and tension, not perfect uniformity. If Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all God yet clearly different, and we embrace this differentiation, resisting the temptation to blend them into some kind of amorphous blob, then there are at least three shapes to pure goodness. (And of course, probably more.) God's goal, it seems to me, is the same in creation. ...there is a clear diversity...to the very nature of this creation. In other words, heaven is not uniformity.*

But how does Jesus deconstruct this big box, strip mall, McHeaven franchise? He tells us "In my Father's house are many mansions." (John 14:2)

What a contrast! Even in the eternal nature of things you're somehow you in your youth on the path that God is leading you on, the journey you are going through, the burden that you are bearing. All of these are combining to create the precise alchemy of your soul, your holiness, and your response. In the eternal scheme of things, we discover that all God wants from you is you.

It's just so humbling, because it always feels like not enough, doesn't it?

Jesus reveals for us that who we are is precisely enough. Precisely what God yearns for, as we yearn for our connection to God. The question then becomes, can we trust this revelation of Jesus to guide us on our journey? How would our lives change if we did? As the music plays, consider how our relationships with each other, with God, and with ourselves might change if we actually trusted that you, and all others, are being gathered in to God, right here, right now?

II. The Holy Desire

Poem: "Love Dogs" by Rumi (translated by Coleman Barks)

*One night a man was crying,
"Allah, Allah!"
His lips grew sweet with the praising,
until a cynic said,
"So! I have heard you
calling out, but have you ever
gotten any response?"
The man had no answer for that.
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.
He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
in a thick, green foliage,
"Why did you stop praising?"
"Because I've never heard anything back."
"This longing you express
is the return message."
The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.
Your pure sadness that wants help
is the secret cup.
Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.
There are love dogs no one knows the names of.
Give your life to be one of them.*

Recognizing this desire of God through Christ Jesus, we are being called into that very being that God has created in us; the very "You" that God desires. The yearning in us to embrace God acknowledges an exclusion, a difference – recognizing both the otherness of God, and yet seeking to be in relationship with God.

In our lives, one example of this yearning for what we know is different from us is the marriage relationship. In seeking a life partner we are following a yearning to be in relationship, for an embrace

of the other, but not seeking sameness. How would our relationships last without the contrast and the occasional conflict to keep the passions burning? Our Tri-Faith relationship is also a good example of this desire to be in relationship without giving up who we are in our own faith traditions and identities.

So how does understanding God's desire to gather us all in, free us to live in a way differently than we would have otherwise? Does this revelation of God through Jesus give us some guidance in taking our next steps into the world? What did your meditation reveal about what your life might be like if you actually trusted Jesus when he tells us that all of us are being reconciled in God?

Paul tells us that we see the redemptive activity of God moving in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and we all are included in this same activity. When we trust in this desire and activity of God, how would we work to reconcile our own relationships with one another as we have been redeemed in God? Jesus responds to his redemption through providing comfort in resistance, providing sanctuary for all who are threatened, and opening the door for conversation and the sharing of stories and thoughts about what life looks like as children of God.

In our worship planning discussion, Eric asked a question about how our judgments of one another might shift if we lived out of this redeeming desire of God. Would the judgments we place on others only be those that we would accept for ourselves if we were the ones found in the wrong? Would we at least act toward others as if our judgments are only temporary since God is in the process of gathering us all in love? Would we give ourselves this same grace?

Jesus opens our eyes to see that which is already true in the world: God is present with us, participating in our lives, and desiring to be in relationship with us. In Jesus we see that God's love and forgiveness extends even to those who put Jesus on a cross, and thus is a love big enough for all of us. It is not because of Jesus that we are loved by God, but God's love is revealed through Jesus. How will God's children, inheritors of this love, respond? Living into this love will look different in every part of creation, as we have been created in the same diversity that is the community of God. So how might we listen to God's call for us? How might we provide spaces and opportunities to discover this love in and between each of us?

Does knowing that God's love includes all of us help us to accept "the other" and offer our help when needed? Are we willing to put our differences in perspective and work together to preserve our planet? Are we able to reach beyond cultural and economic differences to feed those who are hungry, clothe those who need care, and comfort those who mourn? Might we stand with our brothers and sisters of diverse races and faiths to share the love that God has given to us?

Jesus shows us the reconciling love of God in our lives. How will we receive this revelation? In this Age of Spirit how will this redemptive love, revealed in Jesus the Christ, guide us toward a more abundant life together? Each of us must discover our own unique response, as Jesus bids us, "Come and See." Amen.