Invitation to the Table

We come to this Table each week and our words usually lift up the sacrificial nature of Christ's example—the ultimate expression of which was his death on the cross.

But what if we stop too soon? What if the cross is the ultimate declaration that nothing—not even death—could interrupt God's purpose of reconciling with humanity. Grace wins—not guilt. Restoration beats revenge. Reconciliation trumps punishment. Love gets the final word.

Our Communion hymn is #406, *"Beneath the Forms of Outward Rite"*

Pastoral Prayer

Hear, O Israel! The Lord, our God, the Lord is one.

Creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, this morning we remind ourselves that you showed yourself to Israel as the only true God among so many realities that claim our ultimate love and loyalty.

We remember that Jesus prayed that we all might be one as you and he are one. We confess that unity is very important to you and very difficult for us humans.

In your love you adopted all of us into your family, so we are brothers and sisters. We are believers and your Holy Spirit lives within us, so we are one body. We profess a common faith, so we are one church. As members of this congregation, we gather at a common table and celebrate communion together, so we are one fellowship. We celebrate our mutual **inclusion**.

But too often we humans interrupt this unity. Too often we tend to divide. We can be petty and easily offended. We're sinful and can be quick to offend others. We can be self-righteous and quick to judge. We divide over matters of personal conscience and preference. Forgive our easy tendency to divide; our intolerance of **diversity**.

God of unity, in our presence and ministry in this community, grant us a clear vision of true **equality**. Grant that each of us will remain eager to believe the best about each other and about our neighbors; eager to serve others; quick to listen and slow to speak. In our awareness of the true unity in which you already bind us together, help us to live out that reality and in so doing to share with our community that in Christ we are one, and lead us to be ambassadors of your love and peace and unity as we work for the **diversity**, **equality**, and **inclusion** you desire for all humanity. Amen.

Prepositional Faith

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20 (NRSVUE) *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn **over** all creation. [16]For **in** him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created **through** him and **for** him. [17]He is **before** all things, and **in** him all things hold together. [18]And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn **from** among the dead, so that **in** everything he might have the supremacy. [19]For **in** him all the fullness **of** God was pleased to dwell, [20]and **through** him God was pleased to reconcile **to** himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace **through** the blood of his cross.*
The Word of God for the people of God!

She always eats by herself, sitting at a corner table in the lunchroom. She sits by herself on the playground, never participating in the games at recess. Her name is Preposition, one of the neglected children of language. She's hardly ever noticed at all, and she's a word you're never supposed to end a sentence with.

Preposition is a "connecting" word—a linking word. She identifies relationships between parts of a sentence, like subject and predicate. For example, "He went." That's a complete sentence; subject: "He" and predicate: "went"—noun (or technically a pronoun) and verb—actor and action.

While the sentence is complete, the thought is not. He went; but where did he "went?" We could say "He went the store" and get the idea, but it's awkward. We need a preposition to link the verb, "went," and the predicate nominative "store." We need a preposition: "He went ***to*** the store."

Now, is this fascinating, or what? Didn't you get really excited about English class in school, especially when you were studying prepositions? I rest my case: prepositions are the neglected children of language. Little bitty words: in and out and for and by and over and under and above and below and with… Boring.

During the COVID lockdown, we were meeting digitally, but if you were watching our service on Sunday, December 12, 2021—I'm sure your remember: it was the third Sunday of Advent—I'm sure you remember my sermon based on today's Epistle reading and entitled, "Prepositional Faith." If you weren't watching, I'll catch you up; but then I'm going in a different direction this morning.

Pretty important parts of speech: prepositions. And they're important in today's text from Colossians. It's an ancient Christian Hymn, written in two stanzas. Watch for the prepositions.

I

*He is the image of the invisible God the firstborn **before** all creation*
*For **in** him all things were created*
in the heavens and
on the earth
the visible and
the invisible
whether thrones

or dominions
or principalities
or powers [Incidentally, those are the levels of deities in the Roman pantheon—the spirit world of Roman mythology]
*All things were created **through** him and **for** him*
*And he is **before** all things*
*And all things hold together **in** him*
*And he is the head **of** the body, the church*

II

He is the beginning
*The first born **from** the dead*
*In order that he might be first **in** all things*
*For **in** him all the fullness **of** God was pleased to dwell*
*And **through** him to reconcile all things **to** him*
*Making peace **through** the blood **of** his cross **through** him*
Whether on earth
or in the heavens[1]

And you may have noticed several other prepositions I skipped over because they didn't refer directly to Christ; but that's pretty impressive stuff, no matter how you slice it. He is ***over*** all creation, ***before*** all things, all things were made ***through*** him and ***by*** him and ***for*** him; and ***in*** him all things hold together… A form of the word, "all" appears in eight lines of the hymn, and both stanzas present Christ's influence at a cosmic level: in heaven and on earth.

The prepositions of our faith leave little doubt: the center of our universe is Christ. And this is where I make a left turn from the 2021 sermon.

In last week's reading the writer, who is Paul or someone intimately acquainted with Paul's theology, was writing to challenge a false teaching that infected some of the members of the church at Colossae. That teaching distorted Paul's teaching about the Holy Spirit by giving the Holy Spirit priority over Christ.

Jesus? That's fine; but we've moved on beyond Jesus! We have the Spirit! And the Spirit has given us secret knowledge so we can now move on to full spiritual maturity.

It likely was Gnosticism, a heresy which offered personal perfection and spiritual maturity (it claimed) through the Holy Spirit; but in reality it consisted of a mixture of visions, worship of angelic beings, festivals and rituals based on the calendar (2:9–23)—a toxic mixture of spiritual ecstasy and superstition, reflecting the residue of its origin in pagan worship.

The letter to the church in Colossae was written to debunk that teaching. The readings last week and today are clear: the knowledge the Holy Spirit gives is

[1] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 627). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

no secret. The fullness of God is already fully revealed and known in Jesus, and spiritual maturity is measured by his life and teaching.

And I want to address a false teaching infecting today's church. It's not commonly discussed; in fact, it's mostly ignored, even among theologians, but is at the root of default teaching regarding the atoning work of Christ. It is said that Christianity should be called Paulism, because it more represents the writings of the Pharisee from Tarsus than of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. A condescending term has been associated with Paul's teachings. It's called "crosstianity," and today's reading is used as one of several references: ***"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell And through him to reconcile all things to him making peace through the blood of his cross…"***

Crosstianity is a term created by George Bernard Shaw[2] to describe the religious movement he said was originated by Paul. He said Christianity consisted of the teachings of Jesus during his lifetime, while Crosstianity is Paul's interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' death—as if the two could be separated. The approach has become quite popular in the last couple of decades; but I suggest it reveals a relative ignorance of the total context of Paul's writings, and reflects George Bernard Shaw more than New Testament or Patristic writers.

Paul, indeed, addressed the cross, but not as a medium—a tool—of God's atoning work in Christ. For that he much more frequently addressed the resurrection. And if there is a consistent theme running through Paul's writings it's grace, not the cross.

It was Paul's audience that was obsessed with the cross. His audience was Greco-Roman: people steeped in Western logic and reason, and when Paul presented a Jewish rabbi as savior, the response was ridicule over the oxymoron of a dead savior—only dead but crucified by the empire.

And so, Paul had to address the cross. His audience demanded it. His message was not that God planned and engineered the cross to atone for human sin, but that not even the cross deterred God from God's intended purpose of repairing what was broken, reconciling what was alienated.

Jesus was perceived as a threat by the corrupt Temple hierarchy, so they manipulated and incited a mob that intimidated the Roman Governor, Pilate to crucify him under the auspices of Rome. The cross was humanity's idea, not God's. And for Paul, it was not the cross but the resurrection that accomplished God's intended purposes. However you understand the resurrection, something unexplainable happened, the result of which ***moved through the blood of the cross*** to give new life to Jesus' movement of grace over power; the triumph of love over empire,

[2] George Bernard Shaw, "Preface to Major Barbara: First Aid to Critics" (The Project Gutenberg EBook of Bernard Shaw's Preface to Major Barbara, 2000).

reconciliation over punishment.

The center of Paul's faith was not the cross, but Jesus; not blood but grace; not death but a Spirit that transcends death. And in a culture in which 95% say they believe in God but in which the largest and fastest growing spiritual population will not identify with any organized manifestation of Christianity, a primary reason being the false teaching of "crosstianity," sometimes we just have to remind ourselves what we believe and why, and what difference it makes in our lives. And we need to be equipped to bear witness to the truth. It's in the prepositions.

*For **in** him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*
*And **through** him to reconcile all things **to** him*
*Making peace **through** the blood of his cross **through** him*
Whether on earth
or in the heavens.

Thanks be to God!

Pray with me.