
Changing Our Image of God

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Carolynne Williams

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Colossians 1:15-28

Gospel : Luke 10: 38-41

As we grow, our image of God and our self image normally move forward on parallel tracks. We have to break through the images to find out who God really is. Richard Rohr, a theologian who has preached here at St. Philip's in the past few years, talks about spiritual growth in his book *Simplicity*. Richard Rohr, a former monk who speaks all over this country and lives in a hermitage as a monk half of the year, says this about faith: "People who pray always know that people who empty themselves in the wilderness always meet a God who is greater than they would have dared to hope. One always meets a God who is greater than they would have dared to hope. Thomas Merton, an American theologian, a Trappist monk describes changing our image of God as 'Mercy, within Mercy, within mercy.'" (pg. 25) There is always a lot of anxiety, according to Richard Rohr, of changing our image of God. Also, a lot of insecurity in letting go of our current image of God thus, our current image of ourselves is changing as well. Only God can lead us. All we can do is let go.

The spiritualities of all great world religions teach us the practicality letting go, or "how to step aside." (*Simplicity*, pg. 25)

Paul says that in order for Christians to grow and increase in wisdom, power, patience and thanksgiving, we have to understand the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ. Some, try to have an image of God without his Son. Others have no need for the Son, especially in our lives today because he lived so long ago. Besides, he was only a man whose ministry spanned three years.

Christianity isn't simply about a particular way of being religious. It is not a particular system that we learn in order to accept Christ in our lives here and now; Thus the hereafter. Christianity is about the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

This is what this poem from Colossians 1:15-20, In Praise of Jesus Christ, is about.

He is the image of God, the invisible one,
The firstborn of all creation.
For in him all things were created,
In the heavens and here on the earth.
Things we can see and things we cannot,
--thrones and lordships and rulers and powers--
All were created both through him and for him.

And he is ahead, prior to all else
and in him all things hold together;
And he himself is supreme, the head
over the body, the church.
He is the start of it all,
firstborn from realms of the dead;

so in all things he might be the chief.
For in him all the Fullness was glad to dwell
and through him to reconcile all to himself,
making peace through the blood of the cross,
through him--yes, things on the earth,
and also the things in the heavens.

(Paul for Everyone, The Prison Letters, N.T. Wright, pg. 148)

Often our image of God is being in control, our self image . Surrendering to God is not what we as Westerners hold up. We believe that as long as we are in control, then our image of ourselves calls for "being in control." There are only two ways of being that we have control over when it comes to spiritual growth. **One** is having circumstances occur in our lives and **two**, we have control over **how we respond to those circumstances. The actual outcome, of those circumstances, comes from God.**

The more we understand who the one true God is and what this God has done, the more we will understand who we are as Christians and what it means to live in and for him.

When we are in a place of gratitude, we change our image of God as the one who is control. Our parable with Mary and Martha meant just that. We know this parable. We have heard it since we were children. In this parable Mary listens. She sits at Jesus' feet. Martha frets. Martha is anxious, extremely careful, is upset with her sister, is worried and troubled. This is how we often become estranged from God. Mary continues to sit at Jesus' feet and seems to be almost oblivious to all of the frustration that her inactivity is causing, while Jesus is teaching them.

Our reaction to circumstances in our lives that we believe that we have control over cause us to strive to be in "complete control at all times." Thus our image of God is one of supporting whatever we believe to be the right image. The outcome of those circumstances is through God's mercy. Without God's mercy and grace in our lives, we run the risk of becoming estranged. We find our selves becoming upset, troubled and bothered.

Our place of ministry is where we are right now. Where ever that may be. And sometimes that place of ministry involves some degree of suffering. Martha was suffering because by responding to the needs at hand she was in her eyes doing what was of utmost importance. She was busying herself with what she thought needed to be done. And rightfully so. But her frustration came when she refused to sit and listen to the words that were being offered by Jesus. Her angst came when it appeared to her that her sister was doing nothing.

Paul, in his letter to the people of Colossae shared his experience of how he was before he changed his image of God and his image of himself. When he was Saul and had an experience of conversion on the road to Damascus, he became a servant of God. Before his conversion experience Paul was estranged from God. He did not feel connected to God. Now he is teaching the people of Colossae.

Martha was ignoring the teachings of Jesus and thus worried all of the time and her sister frustrated her.

According to Paul and Jesus, it is not until we surrender ourselves to the one true God that we become clearer in our understanding as to who God is in our lives. And when that happens we learn to stand in a place of gratitude. A place of Thanksgiving. A place of praise to and for the one true God.

When I finally determined that I was attending seminary and was clear, so I thought, on the reason why I was going; I was excited. I also felt that those in my world would be happy for me, especially those closest to me. The one response that I have walked with since that time and still continuing to discern, was a response that came from a man who had become a servant of God. His life reflected his commitment to God. He said to me. "You be sure that the God that you are serving is the "One true God." Nothing else will suffice. Serve the one true God. Not some God that I have an image of as being true. But the God who has control of my life and your life. The one that I have surrendered to. The one that we as Christians serve when we let go.

Spiritual growth will put us in the center, in a place of gratitude, in a place of praise of God. You and I will recognize the

Glory of God as we sit at his feet in all that we do. It will change our image of God and it will change how we serve God.

We will find ourselves in a place of gratitude. This will take us in our relationship to and with God to a place of mature spiritual growth. And Jesus Christ is in the center.

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