

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Keeping God’s Alternative Vision Alive”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

October 4, 2009

Job 1:1, 2:1–10; Psalm 26; Heb. 1:1–4, 2:5–12; Mark 10:2–16

Gracious God, we come here very much aware of our separateness. We are different people, we have different likes and dislikes, and we have different stories to tell. We come from different places, some nearby, some on the other side of the world. On this day, help us to move beyond our differences and to see again the vision you have for us: one of a world reconciled through Jesus Christ our Lord. Startle us with the truth of your vision, and open our hearts to receive it, and open our minds and our spirits to be committed to make it a reality among us. All this we ask in the name of the one who came as your reconciling presence in our world. Amen.

“*What if God is not pleased with the way we live our lives?*” These are the words from a Gospel song sung by the United Voices of Praise from our sister congregation, Fisher Memorial United Holy Church. They speak to me because I have the feeling that God is not pleased with the way things are going. Discussions of nuclear armaments are all over the papers this week. Terrorist plots, people being blown up by people who were doing it for religious motivation are everyday occurrences. People saying harsh and cruel things to each other, which makes productive moral discourse about things that matter impossible, not to mention a world that becomes increasingly imbalanced with one billion people without enough to eat. Impoverishment is all around us. “*What if God is not pleased with the way we live our lives?*”

What would please God? What would make God happy with the way we live our lives? If you listen to the vision given to us in Scripture, the Prophet Isaiah says, “On that day, there would be a highway between Egypt and Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt, and the Egyptians will come into Assyria. And there will also be a highway to Israel.” There will be living together. You recognize this as the Middle East, and God’s vision for that very troubled part of the world is that people will come together to share life. They will grow old and sit under trees and talk with each other. They will settle their disputes peacefully, not with missiles. All the people will be blessed in God’s vision for our world.

The Apostle Paul etches out that vision in another way. He said we’ll no longer look at each other from a human point of view, “if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old is finished and gone.” All our old ways of classifying and looking at each other are in the past. We are looking into a better and brighter future because “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” He has made us ambassadors. He has entrusted us with that message of reconciliation, not to fight with each other or to criticize each other, but to learn to live together as God’s peacemakers.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they shall be called Children of God.”

It is a different vision, an alternative vision, to the world as we see it on CNN, in the morning paper, in our neighborhoods, and in our personal lives.

Jesus was once invited to be a guest at someone’s home. It’s interesting to me how much of Jesus’ teaching takes place about and around the table. Jesus was fond of table fellowship. Some people talk about the proclivity of Presbyterians to meet and greet and eat. Well, we came by it honestly! Jesus was always being invited to sit down at the table. He told us that when we decide to give a dinner party, here is the way to make the guest list. (Up until this point, I am comfortable with Jesus being a good host and throwing a lot of parties and inviting people to come together for fellowship and for food.) Then he says, when you throw a party, don’t just invite those people who’ll invite you back, like your rich neighbors. Invite the poor, the blind, the lame.

Then he told a story about a person who planned a dinner party and who sent out a lot of invitations. There was room because people didn't come. They had what sounded like lame excuses: new land, a marriage. So he said to his servants, "Now go out into the streets and invite people who don't ordinarily get to attend fancy dinner parties: the poor, the blind, the lame. Compel them to come in so that my house may be filled. I want a full house! I want everybody around the table. "It is not about the numbers. It is about my vision of a world where the banquet table is open to all."

The table is not reserved for those who have the correct beliefs about the food or about table manners. It is not for those who have the right moral standards. It is certainly not restricted to those who espouse a particular ideology or political philosophy. Jesus says, "My vision of the table is a radical one. All are welcome here." It is precisely the place where all the boundaries that divide the human family—race, religion, political affiliation, tribe, geography, gender, sexual orientation, wealth, poverty—this table is precisely the place where all of that is transcended. We no longer see each other anymore from a human point of view. Reconciliation actually happens. The point is not to exclude but to include everyone, until there is a full house.

Could it be that for all these centuries, we've been getting this wrong? The guest list to the Lord's Table is far more inclusive than anyone ever dared imagine? Black-white, gay-straight, rich-poor, Republican-Democrat, Christian-Jew-Muslim. Could it possibly be that the God who came to us in Jesus Christ wants everybody to be at the table?

Yale's distinguished scholar of world religion, Lamin Sanneh, thinks so. "Early Christianity," he says, "unlike any other religion, broke out of the confines of geography and race; Christianity was a religion for all seasons, fit for all humanity."¹

¹ Sanneh, Lamin O. *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 14.

Jonathan Sacks, Great Britain's Chief Rabbi, writes, "Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than to see God—in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is a different color, whose faith is not my faith, whose truth is not my truth... God is my God, but also the God of all humankind."²

So who is the one who is, according to John's gospel, "the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me"³? Is he not the one who gave expression to God's love, not just for Christian believers, but for all humanity? The one who said he came not to condemn, to defeat, or to lord it over those who rejected him, but he gave his life. He gave his life for them also. And God raised him from the dead and made him to be the Crucified and Risen Lord of all. Not just the Lord over the church, or the Lord over one nation, or the Lord who reigns in the hearts of believers. But the Risen Lord who continues to heal, to reconcile, to liberate, who continues his saving works everywhere in the world. Even here, even now, even where he is not known, acknowledged, and served, even before we Christians get there to tell others about him.

Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary, in a superb book, *A Multitude of Blessings*, asks, "Can we affirm faith in Jesus Christ and seek to live according to his teachings and at the same time live with (and respect the faith of) neighbors who are not Christians?" "Yes!" she insists with compelling eloquence. Consider the alternative: the Christian exclusivism that resulted in wars and conflicts between our neighbors, Crusades to liberate the Holy Land from the Infidel, the expulsion of Muslims and Jews, Inquisitions. Surely, we do not believe that's what Jesus had in mind!

"What if God is not pleased with the way we live our lives?" Cynthia Campbell asks an important question: "Why would a God in whose image all people are created, a God the Bible says is lover of all creation, devise a plan of salvation that

² Sacks, Jonathan. "The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations." *Orbis*, 2002, 46, pp. 601–609.

³ John 14:6

automatically excludes most of the human beings who ever lived?”⁴ It is possible, she suggests, “to affirm the Christian confession that God has made [himself] uniquely known to humankind in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and at the same time to affirm that the religious diversity of human history is part of God’s providential care for all of humankind.”⁵

It is worth considering on this World Communion Sunday, when we lift up this vision of a God who so loves the world that sent his son, not to condemn it, but to save it. It is also crucial if we are going to make it through this 21st century, if we are going to find a way to live together on this fragile planet Earth, to respect those who are different from us. We can affirm with all our might and strength, the good news that God has made known to us in Jesus Christ, and yet be open to our brothers and sisters around the world, to see them not as enemies, but as fellow human beings created in the image of the God who loves the world.

Several weeks ago, I was invited to be the speaker at a celebration by the Muslim community at the Hill Community Center, across from the Lincoln Community Health Center. It was on a Friday night. I usually don’t like to do things on Friday night other than relax and be with my family. After my friend, Imam Waheed, insisted that I should be the speaker, and Carlisle agreed to go with me, we went to this dinner. It was an amazing gathering of people organized by a group working for progress among peoples of faith, inspired by Imam Wallace D. Mohammed. A few of you attended. It was a fairly long evening. I was the keynote speaker, and I tried to keep it brief.

I couldn’t help but see in that audience people from our community, from different faith communities: Jews, Muslims, Christians. There was a spirit that we belonged to each other. The future of our community and the future of our planet depends on us catching this alternative vision that God lifts up for us in Holy Scripture. That God makes known to us every time we come to this big table, this table that today stretches around the world, to which all are invited, that radical, gracious, generous

⁴ Campbell, Cynthia McCall. *A multitude of blessings: a Christian approach to religious diversity*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, p. 13.

⁵ Campbell, p. 2.

hospitality that far exceeds our hospitality. What if that hospitality is at the center of things, that open-armed welcome to all God's children to return home where they belong, where all of us belong at the table? There is divine impatience that we don't get it yet. But God still entrusts to us the challenge to be bearers of that reconciliation. God will not rest until all the barriers and boundaries are gone, and the house is full of all God's people. Thanks be to God for this incredible vision of a world made one. Amen.