

Sermon Six
7/26/15 (Proper 12)
2 Samuel 11:1-15, Psalm 14, Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21)
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Fairfield, CA

Catholics of the Cosmos

Opening Prayer:

Let words sprung from this weak tongue

And our heart's meditations

Light of light, Lord, in thy sight,

May they receive good acceptance.

And may these weak words serve the livening word

And may the living word be made flesh

And dwell here, with us, today

Amen.

My meditation this morning has a title, of which I am probably a little too proud. I call it "Catholics of the Cosmos." The title will, I hope, make more sense as we go along.

But first, I feel compelled to say that I tried my best to make this a good Episcopalian sermon, which is to say 15 minutes or less (12 being the ideal). But no matter how much I trimmed and whittled I could not bring it in much under 20. Now for a Baptist sermon, 20 is about the minimum, 30 minutes is better, and 45 minutes...now we are getting into to some real preaching. So I ask your indulgence if I leave safe Episcopalian shores a venture into murky Baptist waters, just a bit. And I hope you will take some comfort in knowing it could have been a lot longer.

So having already used up a precious minute on that, lets us begin.

Being a still freshly minted Episcopalian I tend, perhaps, to pay more attention to the details of our liturgy than someone who has practiced it for a life time. A few minutes after my discourse we will stand and collectively affirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. This affirmation has been the bed-rock of Christian Identity for at least 1600 years, and towards it affirms that "we believe in the holy, catholic, and apostolic church." After the first several times I said these words, I said to myself (privately) "we do"? The word "catholic" does not roll easily off of a Baptist tongue. But the Apostle's Creed, which is a kind of mirror and companion of the Nicene Creed says essentially the same thing, "I believe in the holy catholic church." Our

earliest spiritual ancestors thought the word was important enough to include it in two of the most foundational formulations of our faith. So, I said, “If I’m going to be a catholic, I’d better find out what it means.” So out came the dictionary.

The word is, of course, most commonly associated with our friends in the Church of Rome, and the first definition reflected this. But those of us who are not members of that church must dig a little deeper. Definition no. 2 says, “belonging to the community of all Christian Churches,” and I felt a little better. But in definition no. 3 I hit, what I believe is the mother-lode. It said, “all inclusive, or all embracing.” And I said “eureka”. That’s the one I’m looking for. That’s the kind of catholic I want to be.

So my remarks this morning are intended, in some small way, to help us recover some of the richness and depth, and “all-inclusiveness” of what it means to be a catholic.

Our readings this morning are especially rich in sermon material. What preacher, worthy of his pulpit, would willingly pass up a chance to preach about David and Bathsheba, where David’s failures, we find, are as great as his triumphs. And our Gospel reading presents the well-known stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes, walking on the water, and calming the storm. But I have chosen to focus on the Epistle reading because in it we have one of the strongest statements (among hundreds in the scriptures) of the cosmic dimensions of our faith. The author writes, *“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”* Of all the things that the writer could have asked for, he prays that his audience will understand that their faith embraces the entire universe. To use our phrase of the day, he wants them to know that they are “Catholics of the cosmos”. And this, breadth and length, and height and depth is also a part of our creed. We say that “we believe in the Maker of Heaven and Earth, of all that is, seen and un-seen.”

But as one of the great poets in our Anglican Tradition has said, “the only wisdom is the wisdom of humility, humility is endless.” It would do us good, I believe, to humbly acknowledge that we, religious folks have, to some degree, lost our cosmos.

The story is familiar, but let me briefly recap. For thousands of years human-kind was content to live in a cozy, three-tiered-universe, with a heaven, an earth, and an underworld. The sun rose in the east, set in the west, and humanity was the center of everything. And this view isn’t wrong. It’s what the average person sees without the aid of a telescope. But then, Kepler, Copernicus, and especially Galileo (with that darned telescope) made their appearance onto the stage of the human drama and pointed out that the universe is much more complex and interesting than what we see with the un-aided eye. And now, just a few centuries later, Mr. Hubble (with *his* darned telescope) has shown that there are not only billions of stars, but billions of galaxies, and they are all moving away from each other at warp speed.

Well, the world, and especially the religious world, was not prepared for these revelations. A few weeks ago, in the Pastor's Forum, Father Perry pointed out, in a different context, that the church has been guilty, from time to time, of shooting itself in the foot. I'm on pretty safe ground when I say that this was one of those times. They may not have pulled the trigger, but they loaded the gun. And just as the religious world was trying to heal its wounded foot, along comes Charles Darwin and turned the lights out, and the world of religion, to a large degree, lost its cosmos.

One of the great tragedies of western civilization (and there have been many) is the debacle of the so-called science vs religion debate. It is a wound from which we still suffer and the religious world bares some of the blame.

But it is time now. Is it not time now for the religious world to get its cosmos back? Is it not time for us to march into the halls of science and say, "We understand that you have been keeping out lost cosmos and we would like it back now, thank you very much. You may borrow it any time, and we genuinely appreciate how you have helped us understand it better, but please don't forget to whom it belongs."

The size and speed and function and composition of the universe is endlessly fascinating, and it is important, but it is not of overwhelming relevance. What is of overwhelming relevance is to whom it belongs. And it belongs, in a certain sense, to you and me, the Catholics of the Cosmos.

This may seem like an excessively bold statement, and I am really not that bold. But I've got something better than boldness. I've got the words of the Apostle watching my back. Let's take a short side trip to the first century city of Corinth.

The Corinthian church was not exactly a poster-child for a well-functioning, healthy congregation. They were a kind of Denise the Menace of churches. If there was a way to do it wrong, these folks would find it. The Apostle spilt more ink, by far, trying to bring sanity into this chaos than for any of the other congregations he established. One of their bad habits was to form cliques which would align themselves with certain charismatic preachers. And each clique was the rival of all the others (kind of reminds me of high-school, if I recall).

And it is to these spiritually challenged folks that Paul writes, "...let no one boast in human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas, or (the cosmos) or life, or death, or the present, or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to the Christ, and the Christ belongs to God." (1 Corinthians 3:21-23)

If you will allow me to freely paraphrase, Paul says, "Stop it already with this factionalism, and running after this or that preacher. Don't you know that everything belongs to you anyway, life, death, the present, the future, even the entire universe belongs to you. How can this be, you may ask? Because you belong to the Christ, and the Christ belongs to the Maker of Heaven and Earth, of all that is, seen and unseen, and you are Catholics of the Cosmos."

Since the days of Galileo, our friends in the halls of science have been searching obsessively for that single, elegant yet simple formula that will give us the final answer for how the universe works. With the recent discovery of the Higgs Boson they think they are getting pretty close (I don't know exactly what a Boson is, but I understand it might be a game-changer). Now, I am no kind of a scientist. I don't know a quark from a neutrino, don't know my Higgs from my Boson, but it is only partly with my tongue in my cheek that I say that if they want to know the formula, they can just come to me, and I'll tell 'em. The secret's out. It's been out for a couple of millennia now. It's right here in our text. If you want to know the length and breadth, the height and the depth of the universe, it is in knowing the love of Christ which is beyond knowledge, which is to say, beyond all human attempts at formulations.

But such is the toxic relationship, still, between science and religion that most of our scientist friends would call the "formula beyond all formulas" meaningless, or even laughable.

I say most, but not all. I would like to speak, now for a moment, about a notable exception.

He was a man of impeccable scientific credentials, making important discoveries in the field of paleontology, and a man of profound faith. He was a Jesuit Priest whose name some of you will know. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was one of the finest scientific and religious spirits of the twentieth century.

His thinking was subtle and complex, but, in a nut-shell, he took the idea of evolution and expanded it to the cosmos. But he went a step further and took the idea of the cosmos and made it Catholic.

His superiors were unprepared. They forbade him from publishing his ideas, and because he took his vows of obedience seriously, he obeyed. So he spent most of his life, literally, at the far ends of the earth, doing science of a very high order, and writing books that would never see print in his life-time. But some of his friends had not taken those vows of obedience and they had copies of the manuscripts, so after his death, they published what could not be published in his life, and Teilhard gained posthumous fame as one of the great minds of an era. And for Teilhard the love of Christ was the energy that moved the stars, and sub-atomic particles, and all things, seen and unseen. (And only 70 years after he died his superiors declared that he wasn't such a bad fellow after all.)

We do not have to agree with every nuance and detail to appreciate and even celebrate how helpful this man of faith and science can be in regaining our cosmos. But as helpful as he may be, he was not the first Catholic of the Cosmos, nor the greatest. Father Perry has suggested that we read through the entire book of Ephesians in a single sitting, or two, and I'd like to second that suggestion. There is no better way to get a feeling for the cosmic sweep of the Gospel.

But I'd also like to briefly re-visit our Gospel reading. For some time, now, honest and faithful scholars have varied widely in their opinions on how we are to best interpret the miracle stories,

and especially those in John's Gospel, they range from the extreme literalists to the extremely liberal. (Most of the time I find myself somewhere close to the middle.) But though these various views are both interesting and important, what is of overwhelming, and of even life and death relevance, is what is at the heart of the Gospel. The writer wants us to understand that in the life of an obscure carpenter from the backside of nowhere there has occurred a unique intersection of time and eternity at a specific point in human history causing a fundamental shift in the meaning of the universe. Sure, he fed the multitudes and calmed the raging seas with a single word, but that's really not the main point, or the primary miracle. Jesus himself said that many false messiahs would come and deceive many with their mighty works. Any magician with skill at smoke and mirrors can dazzle the crowds. If you want to see tricks you can go to Vegas. But only one, only The One can turn on the light in a darkened universe. The writer says that the very Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory full of grace and truth, and this truth is the light of human-kind and the light has defeated the darkness and those who believe become the daughters and the sons of the Maker of Heaven and Earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. (And those who don't believe remain in darkness.)

But our heritage as Catholics of the Cosmos goes back even further. On one starry night, out in the middle-eastern desert, Father Abraham went out walking and God walked alongside, put his arm around him and said, "Abe, can you count all those stars?"

Abe said, "No."

God said, "One day your descendants will out-number those stars and they will be a blessing to every nation on earth."

Then Abe said, "Oh."

Abraham had options. He could have dismissed it all as a fantasy, or a dream, or perhaps a combination of a little too much wine and wishful thinking.

Or he could have said, "You've got to be kidding me." Because Abraham was an old man and his wife Sarah, though beautiful, was barren and well past the age for bearing children.

But Abraham chose a third way. Abraham believed God, imagine that. Abraham believed God and became a Catholic of the Cosmos, one of the first, and one of the greatest.

But as important as it is to travel out among the stars and take our rightful place among them, it is, if anything more important to make sure our feet are firmly planted on planet earth. Abraham, after all, even with the heavenly vision in his mind, and the heavenly promise in his heart had thousands and thousands of miles of hot, trackless desert to walk across, one step at a time.

Now if this were a Baptist sermon, I'd be about half-way home by now. I'd be rounding second base. But since I honor your time, and value your attention, and since I'm trying to be a good Episcopalian, I'll bring this thing to a close.

One of my favorite poets wrote a poem about how to be a poet. He said, “There are no unsacred places, there are only sacred places and desecrated places.” We might just as truly say, “There are no unsacred words, there are only sacred words and desecrated words.” Part of our function as Catholics of the Cosmos, part of our walk through our long desert journey is to bring new sacredness to desecrated places, and new sacredness to desecrated words.

It is an enormous task and all of us are beset by limitations and weaknesses. But God knows our limitations better than we do, and is more willing to forgive our weakness than we are willing to forgive ourselves. But within the boundaries of our limits, and in spite of our weaknesses, we Catholics of the Cosmos are, each one, called and commissioned by the Maker of Heaven and Earth to bring new sacredness to our world and to our words by living into our words as if we truly believe that these words are true.

I will close with a prayer, which is just a slight modification of our epistle reading:

Maker of Heaven and Earth

Of all that is, seen and unseen,

Help us to comprehend with all the saints,

What is the breadth and length and height and depth,

And to know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge

So that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Not to the one who is able to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine,

Be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus too all generations, forever and ever,

Amen.