

Our Little Systems Have Their Day...

Text: John 4:21-24; Acts 7:51

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

*"Our little systems have their day,
They have their day and cease to be,
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."*

It was my first appointment with Professor Dr. Hendrikus Berkhof in Leiden, The Netherlands. His study, every wall bookshelves from floor to ceiling, was in his home at 18 Julianalaan, Oestgeest, a suburb of Leiden. A drape separated the study from the next room. On the drape was pinned a sheet of paper with the lines of Tennyson [quoted above]. I had come to determine if I should pursue my studies with Professor Berkhof at Leiden and to determine if he would be my mentor. My question was answered immediately as I read those words. I do not remember encountering the words before. Perhaps I had sung them as we so often sing our hymns - without the words registering. I do not know. But I know that the moment I read them in that place at that time, the words leapt out at me.

It was an epiphany moment. I was about to embark on a serious graduate study in systematic theology - the discipline that seeks to bring coherence to the whole biblical tradition. I had from a child wrestled with theological ideas and enigmas. My major in college was philosophy, in seminary Systematics. For some reason I had always been fascinated with, perhaps obsessed with, the knowledge of God, the systematic theological understanding of God in my own Reformed tradition. I had been preaching for seven years, four here and three in New Jersey. Those seven years of pastoral experience had challenged the neat and well-defined theological system I brought with me from seminary; I had learned that there was human experience that did not fit with my system. My European educational venture was not so much to secure a degree that would open for me the academic world, as it was an existential quest for understanding. I needed to go back to the foundations. I needed a new foundation for my preaching and my pastoral ministry.

My little system had reached its limits. I'm certain it was my own deeply felt need that caused my heart to beat more rapidly as the words of Tennyson met my eye and found lodgment in my soul.

That was a moment of recognition - my little system had had its day. But there was more - and even now I can hardly sing the words without emotion rising within me - They are but broken lights of Thee and Thou, O Lord, art more than they.

That was the realization that washed as a great wave of grace over me - *Thou, O Lord, art more than they*. My little system may be in trouble but I am not in trouble.

The poem turns to prayer, to direct address - Thou, O Lord, art beyond all our frail human attempts to define Thee, to capture Thee. Thou, O Lord, art more than they!

If Professor Berkhof, an eminent scholar of international reputation pinned such lines to the drape of his study lined with books, chuck full of "little systems," then this was the mentor I needed.

The rest of the story most of you know. For four years I studied with him. Returning here, this congregation graciously invited me once again to become their pastor, understanding I would complete my dissertation. But things began to happen. Renewal, explosive growth - there was little time to get back to writing. After two years, Professor Berkhof wrote, "I no longer expect you to complete your dissertation. Theology is for the building of the Church and God has called you to do the greater work."

He was a wise and great teacher. He gave me my freedom and affirmed my work. And as you know, he and Mrs. Berkhof became in subsequent years our dearest friends. He preached here in 1978, the first service held in this sanctuary, and we had Tennyson's words printed in calligraphy, matted and framed and presented it to him. It hung over his desk and, in March, when I visited Mrs. Berkhof, I took a photograph of the framed words as I was picking out books for myself from his library.

I share this autobiographical sketch with you today because Christ Community is at a crossroads and, in some sense, I think we are where we are because of the personal history I've just related - My recognition of the need for a sounder basis for my ministry; Tennyson's lines as I encountered Professor Berkhof; my formation under his tutelage; his deep faith, warm and generous heart, open, searching mind.

All of that mixed with my own personal circumstances and the experience of God's grace through the love and acceptance of this congregation, set the stage for the past quarter century. Christ Community as we are now constituted is the

fruit of my encounter with one who was the embodiment of Tennyson's poetic expression of the limitedness of all human formulations and the limitlessness of the one eternal God for Whom all our gropings strive.

Now all that has been for these past twenty-five years is being challenged. This week you received in the mail a resolution for the separation of Christ Community from the Reformed Church in America. The congregation would not have to leave, but the Muskegon Classis is forcing me to leave because of my theological views. Therefore, you are faced with a choice of remaining in the RCA without me or leaving with me. The vote will be two weeks from today, May 19. Thus, I have today, next Sunday and the 19th in which to preach with this critical matter pending. I cannot act as though nothing is happening.

Yet, for me, worship is sacred and preaching the most sacred trust that is mine. I have endeavored never to use the pulpit for promotion of the institution or for personal gain. How, then, can I use these Lord's Days such that God is honored, the Word is preached authentically, and you, the people, are spiritually nourished?

I have concluded that this is possible only if I am open and honest with you. If I tell you honestly that this ministry and this congregation is my life and I pray that you will stay in solidarity with me. And, further, let me say that my messages will be an attempt to set forth why I am so bold as to seek your solidarity.

I am the reason Christ Community has been placed at the crossroads. I am your leader. Frankly, at times I tremble at that, but I cannot now abdicate my leadership role. It was never my intention that we should leave the denomination but, faced with this situation, I believe Christ Community has a significant calling to fulfill and that there is a great work for us to do.

Being thus honest with you, you will have to hear me critically, judging what you hear in terms of my own personal investment in our future.

I do believe. That is the Eastertide theme, a theme for our present circumstance in which I wanted to affirm the faith we share - the great Christian convictions by which we live -

That the end is life,

That the news is too good not to share,

That good religion opens the mind and warms the heart.

And now today - a mid-course correction.

Our little systems have their day...

Let me put that in other words, words that capture the heart and spirit of what it means to be Reformed -

*I do believe that the Church needs to be re-formed
by the Word of God and always being reformed.
I believe this is true of the manner in which the Church is governed,
the ways in which the Church worships,
and the understanding by which the Church professes her faith.*

It is the latter issue that is before us - our understanding of the faith. *Thus, my message today will make the claim that the theological tradition of the Church needs ongoing revision so that there is available to each generation a fresh translation of the Gospel.*

We are not speaking of a new Gospel; rather, a fresh expression of the one Gospel of the grace of God that we have experienced through Jesus Christ our Lord, the same Gospel that Jesus proclaimed, that St. Paul preached, that has come to new expression again and again down through 2,000 years so that each generation, each historical period hears itself addressed by the Living God and is able to experience the immediacy of that address in its own context and situation.

Let me point you to the Lessons from John and Acts, both familiar narratives - the one, the encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman; the other, Stephen's speech before the Jewish High Council.

The conversation of Jesus and the woman of Samaria recorded in John 4 is rich and could occupy our attention for several messages. I will limit myself to a few comments that illustrate the claim of this message that the faith tradition grows and develops and must come to ever-new expression.

Let me remind you that the writer of the Gospel is in such a new situation - writing for a Jewish Christian community probably situated in a center of Hellenistic culture - maybe at Ephesus. He is encouraging them to hold on to their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. It is 85-95 C.E. The expected end of the Age has not come. Jewish tradition and identity is being determined by the Rabbinic/Pharisaic Party. There is now in the synagogue liturgy a benediction against heretics and to claim Jesus as Messiah is heresy, as determined by the established Jewish authority. It is now obvious that Israel will go on its way not recognizing Jesus as God's promised one.

The community for whom this Gospel is written is experiencing a crisis of faith.

The writer tells the story of Jesus, not simply to teach history but, rather, to enable the community some 60 years later, through remembering, to experience in their own situation the presence of God Whose presence was experienced in the Word made flesh.

The conversation with the Samaritan woman brings out the newness created by God's embodiment in Jesus. The woman senses Jesus is a prophet. She raises the critical question that separated the Jews and the Samaritans. They were sharp

antagonists. The Samaritans' worship center was Mt. Gerizim. The Jews' worship center was Jerusalem. Who was right?

Jesus answers that in the newness created by his presence - that is, God's presence in Jesus - both geographical locations were being transcended.

Not here or there. Rather, in spirit and truth.

Jesus does not say neither place of worship had served its purpose in the past, but he is pointing to a new reality. The time has come when the true worshiper will worship God in spirit and truth. God is Spirit. *No place, no creedal formula, no sacred text, no ritual form can capture God Who is Spirit.*

The one who would worship God must worship in spirit and truth - that is, according to the nature and character of God - the nature and character now revealed in the Word made flesh - that Word made flesh was there speaking to the woman.

In his action he was revealing a God of limitless embrace beyond the limited understanding of the Jerusalem Cult or the Samaritan Cult. The God present in the Word made flesh was in the very action of Jesus breaking down barriers:

He was speaking with a Samaritan -something a Jew would not do. He was speaking with a woman - something a Jewish man would not do. He was breaking down ethnic and gender walls as he spoke.

Now think of John's community - being thrust out of their spiritual home - out of the Synagogue whose true home had been the Temple at Jerusalem. John is, in effect, saying, so you are put out, you feel abandoned, homeless? Not so. That all changed in the coming of Jesus. Those historical particularities - Jerusalem, Gerizim, the Synagogue at Ephesus or wherever, have no claim on God. God is Spirit and thus Present beyond any human institutional forms or geographical locations.

That was Stephen's claim, as well. His speech to the Jewish High Council was a sharply adversarial recounting of Israel's history. He was arrested for his preaching of Jesus as God's promised Messiah. He was charged with denigrating the Torah and the Temple and Jewish ritual. Luke records his defense, the longest speech in the Book of Acts and thus, in Luke's view, a critical piece.

Luke's intention in Acts is to play down the tension between Paul's Gentile mission and the Jewish Christian movement headed by James. In the story of Stephen we have a Hellenistic Jew arguing with the authorities of Hellenistic Judaism, that is, the Judaism of the Jews living in the broader Hellenistic culture. The tension is the same that John's community is struggling with.

Stephen gives an extended treatment of Israel's history showing that there was always conflict. The authorities claim to follow Moses but Stephen shows that Moses was rejected by Israel in his day. Finally he comes to the building of the Temple and then, quoting from II Chronicles 2:6, Psalm 11:2, and Isaiah 66:1-2, demonstrates from the Hebrew Scriptures that it was always recognized that God cannot be contained in a building made with hands and, by inference, we can say that Stephen was arguing against any historical, human form or structure to encapsulate the Living God.

He then bitterly charges his opponents with replicating the sin of Israel throughout the generations. "You are forever opposing the Holy Spirit..."

Remember this is not a Christian against a Jew. This is an intra-Jewish conflict. And Stephen's bitter words must be heard as coming from one who will be martyred for his faith, representing a small, persecuted movement of Jesus Jews.

If we would hear this text in our own situation two millennia later, we must recognize that the Christian Church is now a world-dominant religious institution. We must remember that the charge against Stephen was actually innovation. The Establishment was putting down the challenge to its structures and forms. The concrete historical established religious institution was resisting the Jesus Jewish movement.

Stephen claimed such resistance was opposing the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the God Who would not be captured and contained in human containers, be they Torah or Temple or religious authorities. Stephen was simply giving expression to the claim Jesus made to the Samaritan woman -

Not here, Not there, But in Spirit and Truth, for God is Spirit transcending all human historical creeds and institutional forms.

Religious institutions have throughout the centuries lost the sense of the Spirit's freedom and thus, over and over again, the religions have been embroiled in conflict, and the charge of heresy has been leveled, often issuing in violence and even Holy War -

Jesus was crucified. Stephen was stoned.

Jesus prayed,

Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.

Stephen prayed,

Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

If you choose to go with me it will not be my intention to win an argument, to be proven right, to prove others wrong. It will be to follow Jesus' way, open to the Spirit to find new and creative ways to embody the grace of God and create here an ongoing community of compassion. The RCA cannot remove my ordination without a formal charge and trial. But no one wins in such a contest. Sometimes religious institutions must simply be left to go their way.

For some of you, that is painful. Long identification with the Reformed Church has been meaningful and separation is cause for grieving. I am aware of that and I never wanted that to happen.

But, faced with the alternative of leaving or denying the larger vision that I do believe is of God's Spirit, I have no choice.

I do believe in what the community embodies. I do believe I have personally been faithful to the tradition that has shaped me - seeking a revision of our faith understanding in light of ongoing human and historical development.

I do believe God's Spirit creates a newness and beckons God's people to an ongoing adventure of embodying and mediating God's grace in concrete community.

Finally, I do believe we can trust the experience we have shared together - for it is my deepest desire that it be true of us as it was of the Samaritan village who heard the woman's witness.

They said to the woman, "It is no longer what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

I dare invite you to follow me, not simply because of my word, but because I know from your own witness that here in this wonderful, probing, searching place you have experienced the Presence of God and known God's grace embodied in this people.

And as I said to the Classis of Muskegon - If you would test my theology, read my people! I am eager to see what wonders the Spirit has yet in store for us.

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