

Jesus: The Grain of the Universe

From the series: Varieties of Religious Experience

Text: Genesis 1:2, 15-19; John 1:14

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
June 20, 1999

Transcription of the spoken sermon

We talk a lot about Jesus here. We've given a lot of emphasis this year to the quest for the historical Jesus. We've had Jesus scholars, Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, here. We have focused a good deal on the historical Jesus to the extent that Jesus is recoverable through historical research, not only of the scriptures, but of the sociological context of his life, cross-cultural studies, and so forth, and we've done that because it is our claim here that, if we get Jesus right, we'll get God right, because it is the claim of the Christian tradition that we see the heart of God in the face of Jesus. We see Jesus as the historical human embodiment of that which is true of God, deep down. We hear the fourth Gospel, that witness that says in words given to Jesus, "If you've seen me, you've seen the father."

And so, we talk about that a lot here because if we would have a proper understanding of God, if we would have an accurate insight into the nature of God, and if that comes and is derived from our understanding of Jesus, then obviously it is important that we do the best we can to learn who Jesus was in his life, his teaching, his actions, in his death and resurrection. So, we put a lot of stress on Jesus because we find Jesus as the clue to God - God, that Ultimate Mystery, that Absolute Mystery, that God beyond our comprehension, that God Who is the Creative Source of all things in the beginning and throughout, and the ultimate goal of all things, that God hidden from our eyes beyond our ability to comprehend, that Mystery we claim has come to expression, embodied in Jesus. We spend a lot of time with Jesus, and I want to say in this message, which gathers some of those loose ends up, that in Jesus we see the grain of the universe.

By the grain of the universe I mean the way it's all moving. I mean the divine intention. I mean from its origin to its consummation, that which it is all about according to the purpose and the intention of God. The grain of the universe. Where things are tending, where they are going if they are going to realize what God is all about. That's what I mean by the grain of the universe, and I want to say that in Jesus we in the Christian tradition find the grain of the universe.

That's the intention of God for its consummation. In Jesus, in the face of Jesus, we come to an understanding of what everything is all about according to the intention of God as we believe.

Now, there's no question that the New Testament points us to Jesus as the clue to the nature of God. John, in his Gospel, opens up with words that remind us of the Genesis account, which says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." John says, "In the beginning was the word; the word became flesh and dwelt among us." The law came through Moses in that historical revelation in Israel, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but Jesus has revealed God, and Paul, in his letter to the Colossians makes stupendous claims in that paragraph I read. He said Jesus is the image of the invisible God. The Greek word behind image is *ikon*; Jesus is the icon of God. He says that in Jesus, all of the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily. He says that in all things Jesus is to be preeminent.

Paul believed that, but the way he expressed that in that cosmic terminology, in that cosmic context, was the consequence of those to whom he was writing because in that Colossians context they had ideas of God. They had ideas of deity; they had ideas of what the world was all about, and there obviously was a strong strain of Gnosticism there, and the gnostic from the Greek word *gnosis*, knowledge, had what they claimed was a secret, revealed knowledge, and for the initiated, this esoteric knowledge gave them insight into the secrets of the universe.

Paul is bringing to them a counter claim. Paul is trying to use their terminology to say that all of the stuff that you claim about those various spiritual emanations, angels, dominions, powers, etc., all of that is wrapped up in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the icon of the invisible God, and all of the fullness of God. One doesn't need all that "stuff" coming down from God and going back to God in order to get God moved far away from matter which is evil. Paul said that the eternal God who is light took flesh in Jesus, matter, the "stuff" of the world, the cosmos, and there this God was revealed. Paul makes stupendous claims for what came to expression in Jesus of Nazareth.

I was reading a rather liberal, but somewhat old, commentary on this text and the commentator makes the point that the people to whom Paul was writing claimed they had a secret revealed knowledge, and Paul says to them, "Look, I've got the truth," and the commentator I don't think really understood what he was saying, but he was saying, "... as though those people to whom Paul was writing claimed to have a secret knowledge of revelation and it didn't matter what they observed in their human experience or what they reflected on, they had this secret revelation," and I thought to myself, "Commentator, what do you think Paul was saying?" Paul was doing the same thing as the Gnostics to whom he wrote. Paul said, "I have a revelation. I have a knowledge, and let me tell you that knowledge." This Christian biblical commentary says of course, this knowledge

that Paul had was revealed by God and it's true and it scattered the darkness of those who said they also had a revelation.

How does one discriminate? I don't know. We are so arrogant, aren't we? We take for granted that our knowledge is true and everybody else's knowledge must be in error. But, be that as it may, what Paul was claiming is right central core Christian tradition.

You want to know who God is? Look at Jesus. Jesus, the way of Jesus, is the clue to the nature of God. And my message this morning is that what we see in Jesus is the clue to the grain of the universe. The way everything is tending, the way everything is intended, Jesus standing for justice, non-violently, embodying love, grace, inclusiveness, marked by compassion, this Jesus in concrete humanity, the Christian tradition claims is an insight into the intention of God.

There are those who would doubt that we can know anything about the intention of God. In the field of science, the natural sciences, there is a debate. Recently in April in the National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. there was a three-day conference on cosmic questions - was there a beginning? Is there any purpose? Are we alone? As a part of that conference which was sponsored by the Association for the Advancement of Scientific Studies and the Templeton Foundation, there was a debate arranged between John Polkinghorne, a physicist trained and who has taught at Cambridge who became an Anglican priest, and Stephen Wineberg, who is a Nobel Prize winning scientist-physicist, and the two of them debated these questions. Is there any evidence for God? Is there any evidence in the analysis of reality from what we can do? Is there any evidence for God's purpose? Polkinghorne, of course, left the field of science for the ministry. Strange, but he did. Because he did see something that he wanted, obviously, to share. Stephen Wineberg says, "I don't even think about religion enough to be called an atheist. I don't see anything." But, there's a very interesting discussion going on in the scientific field itself as to whether or not the universe was sort of planned and engineered so that there would eventually be 15 billion years down the line creatures like us who could be conscious of the fact and could talk about the fact that maybe the universe was planned and programmed with us in mind. The discussion is within science itself.

Even within the Church, though, there are those who wonder whether or not we can be so cocksure about an ultimate purpose of things. An interesting discussion in the recent *Christian Century* by James Gustafson over against William Placher, James Gustafson saying, "You post-liberals, you think you've moved beyond liberalism, you're just playing fast and loose with those terms. The old liberalism, for whatever it lacks, still uses critical rationality and asks the right questions and some of you are just brushing those questions aside." There's discussion not only within the field of science, but within the field of theology about how much we can discern about an ultimate pattern, that ultimate purpose, an ultimate intention of all things.

Well, that's my claim this morning, that Jesus is the clue to the grain of the universe. Now, that's been the claim of the Christian tradition. But, I don't do that simply because that's what the tradition claims. I don't do that, either, just because Paul thought so and the fourth Gospel says so, because there are a lot of things in the Bible I don't believe. They are limited to their particular time and context and the Bible is not a divine book. The Bible is a human book, people struggling to give expression to that experience of God, and some of it is still compelling, and some of it doesn't touch us anymore. So, I don't say this this morning because the Bible says it. I say this morning to you as my message that Jesus is the reflection of the grain of the universe because I believe it, because as I learn what I can learn from all the sources that are available, to the extent that shadowy figure of the past takes on flesh and blood and form, to that extent, that Jesus is still a compelling figure. That Jesus moves me, motivates me, calls me, beckons me, and to the extent that I will follow Jesus, to that extent I do believe I will be in the flow of things, in the intention of God, running according to the grain of the universe, because what I see in Jesus is what makes humans humans, and what makes humanity humane. What I see in Jesus is that underscoring of compassion and mercy and grace and love and truth. What I see in Jesus is that one who is giving of himself for the sake of the other and the building of community on behalf of all those who have otherwise been excluded. I see that inclusive embrace which is embodying the embrace of God, that God Who includes all and excludes none, I see in Jesus that to which I say, "Yes, that's true! Yes, that's good! Yes, that's the way it ought to be."

Jesus compels me, motivates me, moves me. I do believe, to the extent that we would follow Jesus, we would be flowing with the cosmic flow of things. Fifteen billion years, starting with a big bang and an explosion of elemental matter, the cooling down, coalescing, coming to inanimate material to animate material to conscious life to self-consciousness, to human existence, to today. It only took 15 billion years in dimensions of space that I can't even begin to comprehend, and then I am saying that in that Jew named Jesus from Nazareth, from his life, his actions, his words, from what was seen in him, confessed about him, believed about him, from that I get a clue into this 15 billion year unfolding, evolutionary, biological, historical trajectory into the future.

That is a stupendous claim and it is a claim of faith and I do it, not because as I said it says so in the Bible, I do it because when I think about it and I reflect on my human experience and human community and world history, then I say that's where it is - that one, that way, that would lead to a humane existence, a human community marked by justice, mercy, grace, love and peace. And then I would say that I believe that that creative source of all things and that creativity that moves through all and that spirit that enlivens all is that way.

Can I verify that? Of course not. But it does make sense; it feels right. It's consistent with my human experience; it resonates with my human experience;

that Jesus, that's where it is, that's where God wants things to be going, moving, coming more and more to expression, and finally, to consummation. And if that's true, if Jesus is, indeed, the expression of the grain of the universe, no wonder the Gospel cuts against the grain, because everything in me that got me here, all my survival instincts, all of that self-centeredness, all of that self-concern, all of that lust for certainty and security, all of that that would make me all that I can be - all of that drive to be number one, to be on top, all of that which is so much a part of this being of mine that has come out of the slime and out of the jungle - all of that needs to die.

When the time arrived and the Greeks wanted to see Jesus, Andrew and Philip came and said, "They want to see you," and all at once he went into a funk and he began to get philosophical and he said, "Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone." Trying to talk himself into it you see, trying to convince himself that it really was worthwhile going through with. If I hold on to my life, I'll lose it, but if I give my life, I'll bear fruit unto eternal life.

Ah, Jesus is the grain of the universe. That's the way God would intend things if I have any sense at all of what God might be about. But, it cuts against the grain of everything in me. No wonder Paul also said not only that in him all things hold together, but also that it was necessary to die with him. You see, Jesus is totally fascinating, more complex than we've yet begun to probe. Jesus, before whom it is better I should cease speaking, and the choir should begin singing.