In Christ Alone

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Moles are seldom seen furry creatures that play havoc with our yards. They like to make little piles of dirt as they burrow into the soil. I was raised with the phrase, “making a mountain out of a molehill.” This phrase was trotted out by my family whenever I gave exaggerated importance to something.

Religious people tend to make mountains out of molehills. We have a tendency to give major amounts of time to minor things and minor amounts of attention to things of major significance. We major in the minors. We make mountains out of molehills.

Jesus’ sharpest rebuke is not directed at godless, pagan people but aimed at law-abiding, God-fearing people like us. It’s unsettling how often Jesus clashes with religious people who make mountains out of molehills, who major in minor things.

Our story opens with Jesus entering a town called Bethesda (meaning house of mercy). Jesus passes by a pool where hordes of “invalids” have gathered (5:3). Their disability has rendered them, in the eyes of society, invalid. But Jesus has eyes for hurting people. In this town called mercy, Jesus looks with compassion on a man who has been a paraplegic for 38 years.

Jesus asks him a rather strange question: “Do you want to be well?” (5:6). Of course he wants to be well. That’s why he positions himself by the pool each day, hoping its curative powers will heal his dysfunctional body. Perhaps I am too quick to assume he wants to be well. I have known people who become so comfortable in their addiction or affliction that they refuse treatment.

The man responds, “Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred up and someone always makes it into the pool before me” (5:7). Legend has it in this town that the first person into the pool will be cured.

Jesus issues three simple directives to the man: “Get up, pick up your mat and start walking.” The man simply does as he is told and is immediately healed.

At this point in the story, John tells his readers this healing takes place on the Sabbath. The Mishnah, the rabbinic commentary Old Testament law, stipulates 39 acts of work forbidden on the Sabbath. One such act is carrying your
They’re looking at a miracle right in the face, yet their focus is riveted on the technicalities of Sabbath keeping.

Dale Bruner said something last week in his seminar that provoked further thought this week. He observed how many of Jesus’ miracles occur on the Sabbath. A disproportionate number of Jesus’ miracles occur on the Sabbath. Surely Jesus could have waited a few hours in this story until the Sabbath was over to heal this man. His condition isn’t life threatening. It almost seems as if Jesus is picking a fight here. Surely Jesus knows when he tells the man to pick up his mat that he is provoking a controversy. Maybe it’s deliberate on Jesus’ part to tease out in this moment his unique relation to God the Father.

Notice what Jesus says in defense of his actions: “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (5:17). The dispute now turns faster than a New York minute from Sabbath-keeping to Jesus’ identity. We’re told, in verse 18, they were seeking “all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath but was also calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God.”

Whoa, Nellie! Now we’ve got a real brouhaha on our hands. Jesus justifies his work on the Sabbath in connection with God’s work on the Sabbath. He, like God, has the prerogative of working on the Sabbath. The people understand the full impact of his words. They recognize him to be asserting deity.

In those days, nobody would dare call God “Father;” let alone “My Father.” The Jewish people were absolutely fastidious about honoring God’s name. It’s number four on God’s top-ten list of commandments. They were so scrupulous about observing this command that they would refrain from speaking God’s name aloud. They used substitute names for God like Adonai (Lord) or Hashem (The Name). When they transcribed God’s name, they would simply spell it G-d. They would deliberately leave out the vowel so as not to profane the name.

Yet, Jesus comes along and has the audacity to call God “My Father.” Just who does he think he is? Well, as a matter
of fact, he regards himself as the Son of God. God the Father and Jesus the Son enjoy a unique relationship. In the language of our Apostles’ Creed, Jesus Christ is God’s only Son.

Chris and I visited our son, Andrew, and family in the Boston area this week. We had a delightful time with our 2½-year-old grandson. Luke has an endearing name for me. He doesn’t call me “the Rev. Dr. James.” He calls me Pop-Pop Pete. The name Jesus uses for God is comparable. “My Father” expresses intimacy and familiarity.

The remainder of our passage is rather dense. I had a hard time making sense of it this week, so allow me simplify verses 19-27 in terms of Jesus’ two bold truth claims. First, he claims to be the life-giving Son of God. God alone has the power to create life, but Jesus claims this life-giving capacity for himself: Verse 21—“Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes.” Verse 24—“Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.” Verse 25—“The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.” Verse 26—“For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.”

Second, Jesus claims the divine right of judgment. God alone has the authority to judge people in Scripture, but here, Jesus claims this same divine right of judgment for himself: Verse 22—“The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son.” Verse 27—“The Father has given the Son authority to execute judgment.”

As the Son of God, Christ alone has the prerogative to give and judge life. He is the life-giving Son of God and the judgment-exercising Son of Man.

We are devoting three months worth of sermons on what Christians believe in the Apostles’ Creed. This creed begins, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.” The metaphor of God as Father and Jesus as Son confuses some people. Since earthly fathers procreate sons, religions such as Mormonism assume Jesus to be a created being. Yet, Scripture makes clear that Jesus exists as God from eternity. This was the point of Dale Bruner’s sermon last Sunday. John writes, “In the beginning was the Word.” Later this Word becomes flesh in Jesus Christ.

The middle section of the Apostles’ Creed is by far the longest. Twelve words describe God the Father and 28 words depict God the Holy Spirit, yet a whopping 70 words are used to describe Jesus as Son. Some people, in the early centuries after Jesus, assumed
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since Jesus is human that he cannot be divine. Or they argued since he is divine that he can’t be human. But Scripture and our creeds affirm Jesus to be both human and divine. He is not some sort of half-human, half-divine intermediate being. He is fully God and fully human.

The Apostles’ Creed affirms our belief in “Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.” We believe God offers the world something altogether unique in Jesus Christ.

So what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life? The danger is subscribing to the Apostles’ Creed as we would an on-line publication or newspaper. I subscribe to *Sport’s Illustrated*, but it doesn’t change my life. Reciting the Apostles’ Creed is not a check-the-box exercise. This creed is meant to shape us into genuine Christians.

Christians assert Jesus Christ as our Savior. This word Savior equates to our word “wholeness.” God doesn’t only want to save a portion of our lives. God wants to save our whole lives.

We claim Jesus as Savior, yet we keep running to other saviors for salvation. We still medicate our lives with substances that will not satisfy. We hang onto the belief that other relationships will satisfy us or money will make us happy. If we believe God offers the world something unique in Jesus Christ, then only Christ has the power to save us. He saves every part of us—our damaged emotions, past hurts, everything.

We invite Jesus into our lives the way we invite house guests into our homes. We entertain company in the more presentable rooms of our house. We wouldn’t think of showing them our cluttered rooms or overstuffed closets. Yet we invite Christ into our lives this way. We invite him into our formal living and dining rooms. We don’t want him to go roaming into our back rooms or storage closets. There are whole areas of our lives walled off from Jesus Christ.

I like what George MacDonald writes: “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks on the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently, he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and doesn’t seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. You see, he tends to come and live in it himself.”