

“Lord of New Creation”

Introduction: Probably the most well-known parable of Jesus is that of the sower, or the soils, as it's sometimes called. It features a farmer who went out to sow his seed and as he scattered it, some fell on a hard path, some fell in rocky places, some fell among thorns, and some fell on good soil. The seed, we learn, is the word of God, and the various soils represent the hearts of the listeners. Only the seed that was received by good soil took root and bore fruit, while that which fell on the hard path, or among rocks and thorns, didn't fare so well. It was either gobbled up by Satan, or choked out by persecution, worry, or the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things (Mark 4).

I don't know if Paul had this parable particularly in mind as he wrote to the Colossian church, but he certainly understood the need for followers of Jesus to be ever more deeply planted in the soil of our hope, lest we become like the seed that starts to grow but never bears lasting fruit. So we hear Paul encouraging his readers to “continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation . . .” (v. 23). A life of faith, in other words, is not just a transaction; it is a relationship that is dynamic and ongoing and growing. Paul knew that there was much around them, just as there is much around us, that can cause this relationship to weaken. Their highly pluralistic culture, which is not much different than ours, regularly called their belief into question.

To help his readers continue in a stable and steadfast way, Paul has begun to reflect with them about their identity as citizens of the kingdom of God. Last week we saw the way in which Paul began talking about the glorious nature of its King, seeing in the first stanza of the poem that is vv. 15-18 that he is Lord of all creation. All things were created by him and through him and for him, and that in him all things hold together (e.g., bike frame, operations system, cornerstone, sacrum). We also considered that although this king is distinct from his creation, he has not remained distant from it but has come personally in his Son Jesus. Why has he come? The second stanza now identifies that this king has entered the realm of human experience in order to reconcile all things and take his place as Lord of God's new creation. Let's consider three aspects of this king's redeeming work.

I. He is the head of the body, the church

A. Somewhat remarkably, Paul starts with the church! “And he, [the Son] is the head of the body, the church.” In some ways, Paul is actually working backwards in time in this stanza, moving from the church, back to the resurrection, then back to the cross, then back to the Colossians in their pre-Christian state. But I think he begins with the church, with the present, because right away he wants us to see that the church has a significant role to play in the working out of God's redemptive plan and purposes. The church is not just a nice place for folks to come and worship on a given Sunday, it is to serve as an outpost of God's new creation, an outpost of the kingdom of God. As Jesus made God the King visible, the church is to make his kingdom visible as it lives out the good news in both word and deed.

B. As Jesus proclaimed to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount, you all are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on the hill. “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Ma. 5:16). How do we do that? We let our light shine as we look to Jesus as the head of our body. Elsewhere, when Paul uses the body metaphor to describe the church it is to stress the interdependence of church members (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-31). Here, he is emphasizing the dependence of the entire body on Jesus, who is the head, a word that depicts both supreme leader as well as source of our strength. Well, how did Jesus become that?

II. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead

A. He became our head, our leader and our strength, through his resurrection: “He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” With this statement, the poem moves from creation to new creation. As N.T. Wright has observed when talking about the resurrection, Jewish belief was that there would certainly be a resurrection of the righteous at the end of time. But they did not anticipate that someone would rise from the dead anytime before the end. By doing so, Jesus caused the age to come to burst into the midst of this present age. With the resurrection of Jesus, God’s new creation has begun, with Jesus in authority over it all. And as Pentecost would soon reveal, the power of this new age was then unleashed, through the Spirit, into and through the church.

B. As Paul wrote elsewhere, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor. 5:17). Now, in order for the new to come, Jesus had to take away the old. He did this by going to the cross. It’s where the poem goes next.

III. He is the reconciler of all things

A. In Jesus, God has come to reconcile all things:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (vv. 19-20).

In general, when people are asked why Jesus came to die, the answer given is, “So that we can be saved from our sins and go to heaven when we die.” But this text reveals that the answer is much grander, much more sweeping than that. Jesus came to die so that all that he had created might be put into right relationship and God’s new creation begun. It’s not an escape from the world we’re seeking, but a place in God’s new order, his new age, his new creation.

B. God, remember, is a relational being. At his core he exists from all eternity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, what he’s created has the fundamental nature of relationship, and what we find in the opening chapters of Genesis is that there are four foundational relationships that we, as human beings created in his image, experience. There is our relationship with God, with our self, with others, and with the rest of creation. These relationships form the building blocks for all of life. If these are right, a sense of shalom, of peace, of well-being results. Get them wrong and everything goes out of whack.

C. Well, the early chapters of Genesis inform us that when sin entered the world, these four did indeed get out of whack! Instead of intimacy and joy, our relationship with God turned into one of hostility and fear. Instead of inherent worth and dignity, our relationship with our self turned into one of guilt and shame. Instead of love and self-sacrifice, our relationship with others turned into one of hatred and blame. And instead of beauty and order, our relationship with the rest of creation turned into one of struggle and abuse. Shalom departed, spiritually, psychologically, socially, and physically.

D. But God did not give up on us. In Jesus, he came and made a return of shalom possible. He brought peace by the blood of his cross, reconciling, putting into right relationship, all that he had made. He reversed the curse and brought life where there had been death by substituting his death for ours. The Colossians themselves were a case study of such reconciliation. At one time they all had turned their backs on God, out of relationship with him, thinking rebellious thoughts and doing rebellious deeds. They were alienated and hostile in mind.

What does it mean to be alienated? It means to be out of step with God’s purposes, and outside of the family of God. To be alienated affects both our minds and actions, as we see the Colossians

described as being “hostile in mind and doing evil deeds.” Such hostility is not limited to axe murderers and child molesters; it includes every life that is lived purely for itself, as if God did not exist.

But the good news is that despite our behavior, God has refused to watch us aimlessly wander away. In fact, the poem declares that God was *pleased* to do what he did in Jesus, even to the point of the giving up of his life. The prophet Micah has a helpful reflection on this delight of God to shower us with his mercy (Micah 7:18-19):

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

Like the Father in the parable of the prodigal God, God’s arms are open wide as he looks out for us and runs to meet us after we have been wandering aimlessly, alienated from His family and purposes. As he welcomes us back into his family, all of our various relationships with the world begin to fall under and within his healing purposes.

So, in the midst of the challenges of life and faith, who do we think we are? What helps to keep us stable and steadfast in our faith, continuing to produce good fruit? Our men’s retreat in April is entitled: “Refined by Fire: Growing in Faith through the Furnace of Affliction.” Sounds like a good time, right?! But we’re taking this on because affliction is one of the primary reasons people struggle with, or even reject God. Probably the most frequently raised objection to the Christian faith, as we see suffering in both our lives as well as on a global scale, is this. “How could a loving and all powerful God let this happen?!” The conclusion is that either God is not all powerful or he is not all loving. Those who believe this can begin to slip and slide in their faith.

But this text, among others, keeps our feet from slipping too far. It gives us God’s incredible and final answer to the problem of suffering: creation and new creation. He is Lord of both. Through and in Jesus we see that he is both the all powerful creator of all things, and the all loving reconciler and redeemer of all things. May this truth sink ever more deeply into the soil of our hearts, so that we, as the church, might remain stable and steadfast in our faith, for our sake, for the sake of others, and for the glory of God.