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The Character of God

John 3:16-17

I think of the elementary-aged child who came home from school after his first sex-education class, only to be quickly pigeonholed by his younger brother, who was eagerly awaiting a report. "Alright, tell me," said the younger lad, "where do babies come from?" The elder brother quietly replied, "The stork brings them. Mommies and Daddies write the North Pole, and they have this computer center that processes requests, and then sends babies to hospitals via these specially-trained storks." The younger kid replied, "The sex-ed people told you that?" "No," said the brother, "but if I told you what they said, you wouldn't believe it."

If I tried to tell you what a complex series of miracles had to happen to make it possible for you to reach out your arm and touch the pew in front of you, or touch a person beside you, you wouldn't believe it! I'm not capable of expressing the incredible improbability of it all. The more scientists have become aware of how incredibly improbable the fact of the universe is, the more many feel compelled to explain the universe by means of the anthropic cosmological principle. The anthropic cosmological principle. Which means what? I will tell you, but first you must grasp this basic point: the universe could have evolved in a billion ways. Yet out of these billion ways, *the universe evolved in the one way that enabled human life to exist.* Think of an inconceivably tiny dot of matter, so small that it would be one billionth the size of a proton – and a proton is so small that 500 trillion of them could fit on the dot of an "i". So, we are talking of something that is one billionth of one of 500 billion protons. Inconceivably tiny! That is the universe. The dot explodes! Boom! Within the first second of that explosion, gravity and every other physical force that governs the universe would have been produced. Within one minute the universe was a million billion miles across and growing. Within three minutes 98 % of all the matter that is or ever will be was produced. Yet so many crucial processes had to happen just right for life to happen. Had gravity been a trifle stronger, the universe would have collapsed. Just a trifle weaker and nothing would have been able to form. Hydrogen had to convert to helium precisely in a ratio that converts seven 1/1000ths of its mass to energy. I don't even understand what that means. But it had to happen at precisely the rate it did. If the ratio was slightly lower, the universe would be all hydrogen, If the ratio was slightly higher, the universe's hydrogen would have long since disappeared. Such amazing realities have moved thinking people to think that our *cosmos*, our world, was *intended* to evolve in such a way that would allow *anthropos*, humanity, to exist. This is the anthropic cosmological principle. But who intended for the cosmos to evolve in this way? On this point, some scientists fall silent. Others point to that ancient Biblical explanation at the beginning of our Scripture: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." They would say that we have a reality because a Greater Reality called it into being.

So, we begin this morning with a couple of amazing facts:
we have the wondrous reality of the universe;

we have the wondrous Reality that called this universe into being.

Yet this does not necessarily mean that this Creator cares anything about the universe the Creator has called into being.

There are those who see God as a Cosmic Watchmaker, who has created the Watch, and now sits back and watches it run down, remote and disinterested. That is not the Christian concept of God.

The Christian concept of God is that the Creator of this wondrous universe is actively working in this universe to bring about communion between Creator and creation.

As John famously testified: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

The idea that God is remote, disinterested in the current workings of creation is one of the lies told about God.

It is an ancient lie, a persistent lie, a lie that Paul heard from the philosophers at Mars Hill.

But he who had experienced the intimacy of God's transforming power, could say in response, "No, God is not far from every one of us."

This ought to be a thought that gives every single day of our lives a sense of thrill.

It ought to amaze us to think that God is incessantly, persistently, working in history and in individual human lives to communicate the character of God.

God does not want us ignorant about the character of God.

God is working to communicate the divine character: every time we give God an opening

God uses it to try and communicate to us knowledge of God's will and way.

God is not remote. God is not disinterested. God is passionately involved in our lives.

God is not far from every one of us. So every moment becomes an opportunity for transformation.

This is a thought that ought to give us a sense of excitement about every single day.

Such is the character of God.

Oddly enough, since one lie told about God is that God is remote and disinterested in us, we should find it strange that another lie told about God is that God is completely controlling, to the point that God creates people in order to destroy them.

Not everybody, of course – God creates some people to save them, but God creates some people and then destines them for destruction.

I must admit that I would have thought that the lie that God predestines people to destruction is a lie that would have been thrown on the trash heap of theological history.

But, amazingly, there continue to be people, many Baptist pastors and theologians among them, who continue to promote the idea that God creates people and then predestines them to destruction.

That is a lie about God. How do we know it is a lie?

Because John says so clearly, "*Whosoever will* may come."

John says, *Whosoever will* may enter the divine kingdom.

Whosoever will may open their being to God's insistent initiative.

Whosoever will may be awakened to the transforming reality that they are a child of God.

In a famous debate many years ago between an agnostic and G. K. Chesterton

about the transforming power of God, the agnostic argued, "Leopards cannot change their spots."

To which Chesterton famously replied, "That may be true. But human beings are not leopards.

Human lives are transformed by God's grace all the time."

God is not remote and disinterested. That is a lie.

God is not controlling.

God is working in the world to influence decisions that we might open our lives unto God.

Our God is a God of redemption. First and last!

Our God is working in the world not to destroy the world but to redeem it.

The clarity of John's thought can't be mistaken: *God sent his Son as a redemptive instrument.*

God did not send his Son as a tool of judgment to condemn the world.

God sent his Son that the world might be saved through him.

Our God is first and last a God of redemption.

Does God judge us? Oh yes.

But God's judgment is intended to open us up to receive the power of redemption.

Indeed, John says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life."

Now, I grant you, the phrase, "only-begotten Son," sounds foreign to our ears.

It is almost too earthy a metaphor to be applied to God. Yet John uses it.

Why? He does not use it so we will think of God birthing a child.

The metaphor is meant to convey that in Jesus Christ God has invested the divine character in an intense and intimate way, so that the story of Jesus is intended as revealing the story of God.

To behold the character of Jesus is to behold the character of God.

God allows the divine nature to be revealed perfectly and powerfully in the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

"Only-begotten," speaks to the singularity and intensity of God's investment in the story of the Christ.

Indeed, what other image speaks so profoundly to the costliness of love?

I suspect that in a moment of rare courage we could lay down our lives for others in love.

In the right moment you would probably give up your life for somebody else.

But there is not a parent in here who could contemplate giving up his or her child on behalf of others.

That is an act of costly love too terrible to contemplate. The mind recoils at such a sacrifice.

So John is trying to say to us that the love God extends unto us is the most costly kind of love, expensive love, wrenching love, agonizing love.

The God who gives us His "only-begotten" Son, gives unto us the love that is costliest to God to give.

That is what the language of "only-begotten" means.

There is one word in John's presentation of God's character that we have not yet touched on.

"God loved," yes. But God also gave. God's love takes the form of God's giving.

God's character is as a giving God. Through giving God translates love into action.

God gives us a universe.

God gives Eve unto Adam and Adam unto Eve. God gives Moses tablets full of the Law of life.

God gives the church the power of the Holy Spirit.

God as the Good Samaritan gives whatever is necessary to bind the wounds of the beaten man.

God as the Father of the prodigal son gives us hugs and kisses and rings of recognition and parties of celebration, because giving is the character of God.

I think of an encounter Mother Teresa had with a pestering journalist who asked her to define her work.

She replied, "I give them Jesus."

"Yes," he said, "but what tangible impact do you have on sufferers, what exactly do you do?"

She answered again, "I give them Jesus."

"Fine, but to what do you attribute your effectiveness?" "I give them Jesus."

Was this old lay being perversely obscure? Was she parroting shallow piety? No!

She was trying to communicate,

'I love these unlovable people because such love is the only way I can respond to the God who loves me.

I tell them that I give them Jesus because they cannot understand a love that bathes and feeds and heals them and gives them peace unless they grasp that this love is rooted in a love beyond this world.

I give them Jesus in the sense that my love is rooted in a love that is beyond this world.'

The character of God influences the character of how we live.
If God is love, then there is only one impossibility that I know of in our entire Scripture:
you cannot try to love God and hate people.
If God is love, the only way you find the character of God is by loving the world.
The farther you go in the act of the service of the world,
the farther you will go in finding the character of God.
Strange what we remember, isn't it?
Year's ago I ran across a sentence that said that many Chinese dialects
employ the same word for love as they do for pain.
I remember thinking, 'That is so strange.'
The longer I live, the more that equation makes great sense to me.
To love truly is to make yourself vulnerable.
To love truly your spouse, your child, your friend, is to open yourself up to be wounded and scarred and
betrayed and hurt.
Such is how God loves the world!
God loves with a love that is so vulnerable that the Divine allows us to wound God with our lives.
If we are to worship that kind of God,
if we are to grasp the character of that kind of God
we must love other people with a love that opens up the depth of our being to be wounded.
Greater love has no one than this, that he would lay down his life for his friend.
So God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son
that we his friends might not perish but have everlasting life.
If we can grasp just a fraction of this incredible truth,
every day of our lives will be tinged with wonder,
tinged with wonder,
amazed at the character of God.

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