

# Sermon

## “The Place of My Resurrection”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, January 31, 2021

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

*Psa. 111:1 Praise the LORD!*

*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.*

2 *Great are the works of the LORD,  
studied by all who delight in them.*

3 *Full of honor and majesty is his work,  
and his righteousness endures forever.*

4 *He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;  
the LORD is gracious and merciful.*

5 *He provides food for those who fear him;  
he is ever mindful of his covenant.*

6 *He has shown his people the power of his works,  
in giving them the heritage of the nations.*

7 *The works of his hands are faithful and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy.*

8 *They are established forever and ever,  
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.*

9 *He sent redemption to his people;  
he has commanded his covenant forever.  
Holy and awesome is his name.*

10 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.  
His praise endures forever.*

*1Cor. 8:1 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2 Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3 but anyone who loves God is known by him.*

*1Cor. 8:4 Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” 5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords— 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*

*1Cor. 8:7 It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.*

## **Prayer for Illumination:**

**Lord, we would not be so prone to self-righteousness if it were not so much fun. We acknowledge that our discipline of coming before your Word each week is a discipline meant to humble us and to cause us to re-think our settled assumptions and our self-serving certitudes.**

**So bring to us today a Word that helps us to see and know ourselves as we truly are:**

- † **Wretched sinners in need of forgiveness**
- † **Lost sheep in need of rescue**

† **Lost pilgrims in need of a better map and a better way to reorient our lives in reference to you alone.**

**And when we have come to these unsettling realizations about ourselves, do not fail to remind us that in the face of all our brokenness, and failure, a double-minded discipleship — your grace out paces all of our short-comings. Let us, in the end, rest in the knowledge of your persistent commitment to “begin again” with us.**

**And for our part, we have come to hear, to listen, to inwardly digest, and to be open to change — that we might more brilliantly reflect the good news of your grace in all we say, and do. Amen.**

**Prelude to Sermon — I need your indulgence for a couple of minutes while I set the stage for today’s message...**

**I. In mid-November I read an article in *The Atlantic* — it was an interview with former president Obama. Well, into the interview Obama makes this observation as he is spelling out his fears for democracy in the US.**

*“If we do not have the capacity to distinguish what’s true from what’s false, then by definition the marketplace of ideas doesn’t work. And by definition our democracy doesn’t work. We are entering into an epistemological crisis.”*

**A. To your pastor’s way of thinking . . . this hits the proverbial “nail on the head.”**

**B. *Episteme* - Greek for “to know.”**

**1. It is not a simple matter to tease out what we “know.”**

- C. Going back 2500 years we can see that the Western Philosophical tradition has had a vigorous and at times hostile contestation about the nature of knowledge and what we mean when we say we “know” something.**
- D. In Plato’s dialogue *The Sophist* he has a contestation of ideas posed between the Gods and the Earth Giants. Plato is, of course, on the side of the Gods. He is trying to argue against the Sophists who he says are on the team of the earth giants.**
- E. In ancient philosophy “truth” and “knowledge” are absolutely distinct from “beliefs” and “opinions.”**
  - 1. Truth and knowledge pertain to those things *about which we could not possibly be wrong.***
  - 2. Beliefs and opinions are always probable - not certain.**
- F. For something to be considered “true” and therefore pass into the realm of “knowledge” it had to pass a four-fold test:**
  - 1. Timeless — Always has been and will always be this way.**
  - 2. Universal — Is true everywhere.**
  - 3. Necessary — It must be as it is (no other possible explanation).**
  - 4. Certain — no probability. This is something about which we could not be wrong.**
- G. So why this emphasis on defining Platonic philosophy and the meaning of epistemology?**

1. Because Plato's view has dominated the Western philosophical tradition even though attempts to arrive at truth or knowledge defined this way are, thus far, logically indefensible. [affirming the antecedent].
2. We do not have access to unique descriptions of reality which correspond to the four-fold test — and, in fact, never have had access to them.
3. It becomes a circular logic because *all our data comes via experience which is, by definition, particular* (i.e. not unique).

**II. I mentioned in another recent sermon the phrase:  
“Kindness is Better Than Being Right”**

**A. Dr. Bob Ramey - Polity Professor**

1. “If you want to pass the Polity Ordination Exam - remember that kindness is better than being right.”

**B. This has become a mantra for me in ministry**

1. In life too - at home, in the world.
  - a. A number of you have responded in the last several weeks to offer your own contributions to the them of Kindness being better than being right...

† "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they

**are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business.” [Merton]**

**† “For a society and a culture that’s so often thought of as relativistic, we are extraordinarily absolutist about a whole range of things. This absolutism is an emotional, rather than an intellectual matter, an absolutism which says, I must never be wounded by the effects of my incapacity or limitedness; I must never be left not knowing; I must never be left in a moment’s uncertainty about where I stand.**

**I say ‘I’ because of course we here are all part of this; it’s not them over there who are doing all these bad things, it’s you and me, unfortunately. I reach for those images which help me not be wounded and which assure me that I do know, rather than accepting that my life, my well-being is constructed by grace precisely as the cracks appear, and the models of goodness are dissolved.”**

pages 164 to 165 of the book *Balm in Gilead*, Rowan Williams in his essay “Beyond Goodness: Gilead and Discovery of the Connections of Grace”

**C. I failed to appreciate that Bob was “borrowing” that bit of wisdom from scripture itself. Indeed, I believe now that Bob learned it from the apostle Paul.**

## **II. The Situation which Paul’s letter is addressing**

### **A. Corinth is a congregation divided**

- 1. Wealthy and well-educated ‘elites’**
- 2. Newly converted — and generally less well-educated and poorer members.**

- B. But not *just* social and economic divisions**
  - 1. Also theological divisions about many things**
    - a. Perhaps chiefly about the relationship to former pagan loyalties.**
    - b. Issue of Meat offered to idols.**
- C. The elites are right - by the way - when they claim that eating meat offered to idols has no negative consequence in terms of their righteousness.**
  - 1. They are following Jesus' own instructions about the connection of faith to contact with unclean things:**

*Matt. 15:11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."*

*Matt. 15:17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.*

### **III. Although these "elites" wished to discuss the logical implications of their "knowledge," Paul focuses on the ethical & Relational implications.**

- A. In verse 1, he shifts the focus and insists that the real question is not whether one has a deeper knowledge, which "puffs up" (*physioe*, i.e., inflates the self), but that one exhibits love which "builds up" (*oikodomee*).**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

- B. Paul knows that *true knowledge is about love for the weak & justice for those who need help*.**
  - 1. He has read the prophets:**

*Jer 22:15 Are you a king  
because you compete in cedar?*

*Did not your father eat and drink  
and do justice and righteousness?  
Then it was well with him.*  
16 *He judged the cause of the poor and needy;  
then it was well.*  
*Is not this to know me?  
says the LORD.*

**C. While Paul is in agreement with those elites:**

1. **“In the final analysis, this is about loyalty to Christ himself, which has to be expressed by sometimes costly sensitivity toward weaker fellow Christians. Knowledge without love puffs up, but knowledgeable love builds up the community.”**

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**D. In regard to the “weak”**

**“Ironically, it was not that the “weak” were careless about food or dining partners, but that they were bothered too deeply by these things. They were defiled not by *what* they ate, but *because* they ate.**

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1. **For that reason Paul wants to shift the conversation away from the food itself to the consequence of eating it within the community of the church.**
2. **“Thus he warns the Corinthians that insisting on their “authority” (*exousia*: NRSV has “liberty,” but this obscures the repetition of the term in 9:4, 5, 6, 12, 18) to eat these foods**



**will result in the destruction of their weaker brothers and sisters.”**

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**IV. Paul, himself, in his letter to the church at Roman will conclude:**

*Rom. 7:21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

- A. Now we Presbyterians are an opinionated lot**
- B. And - by the way - I think that most of the time we are right!**
- C. But we would do well to remember that  
“Kindness is better than being right!”**

**V. And if this is true at church - it is *also* true at home and in the world.**

- A. How would our conversations with our children, or parents, or spouses change if we remembered to be kind even when we think we are right — *maybe especially when we think we are right!***
- B. How might the tone and content of our political and social discourse be improved if we let our “political correctness” on both the “left” AND the “right” be tempered by the conviction that those “other people who are so obviously wrong” are children of God no less than we are and they are**

**owed some kindness from us — *even if we think they are wrong* about a great many things.**

**C. Attaining the wisdom of knowing how to be kind even as we navigate the epistemological crisis president Obama so rightly identified is always going to begin within.**

**D. I do not often quote John Calvin**

**1. But today it seems to me quite fitting to notice where Calvin began when he sat down to write the Institutes of Christian Religion.**

***1. Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God***

*Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no one can survey themselves without forthwith turning their thoughts towards the God in whom they live and move; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone. In the second place, those blessings which unceasingly distill to us from heaven, are like streams conducting us to the fountain. ... Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of themselves, is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find God.*

***2. Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self***

*On the other hand, it is evident that we never attain to a true self-knowledge until we have previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into ourself. For (such is our innate pride) we always seem to ourselves just, and upright, and wise, and holy, until we are convinced, by clear evidence, of our injustice, vileness, folly, and impurity. Convinced, however, we are not, if we look to ourselves only, and not to the Lord also - God being the only standard by the application of which this conviction can be produced. For, since we are all naturally prone to hypocrisy, any empty semblance of righteousness is quite enough to satisfy us instead of righteousness itself.*

- B. I love that Calvin connects self-knowledge with knowledge of God.**
- 1. The English, Augustinian mystic of the fourteenth century — Walter Hilton said it this way:  
“When you come to know yourself as you truly are, it will not be long before you know God as God truly is.”**