

Hebrews 1:1-2:15
Psalm 8:1-9

THE PROBLEM OF GOOD

The problem of Christology – trying to define and describe the identity of Jesus – is an endless maze of contradiction and paradox. Many of you struggle a lot with Christology but do not think of it in such terms. Sometimes all of us wonder about how much we believe in Jesus. When we are in moods of doubt, we usually get picky, as if precision will help us. Do we believe Jesus is: God? The Son of God? A highly evolved human? An ancient Palestinian peasant whose death somehow got transmuted into some huge legend? Does Jesus have the credentials to save or transform us? Dealing with such issues is what Christology is about. The problem of Christology – trying to define and describe the identity of Jesus – is an endless maze of contradiction and paradox.

It is also a dangerous subject. Many have died over and around these issues. Many still do. And many will in the future. This story is far from over. I do have friends who make what they think are scathing remarks about the fact that people quarrel and die over religious issues. I always reply that I have no problem understanding that. Not many things in this world are worth dying for, but God is one of them. You think we should die for sex, or money? For sports, or politics? Grow up. Well, maybe for the freedom end of politics, but whether you know it or not, that is back to religion.

Stuck with the human point of view, we are never able to adequately comprehend or describe who Jesus is or what His credentials really are. Part of the problem, surely, is that we do not comprehend or understand who *we* are either. We remain confused about our own identity, and constantly doubt and question whether we have any importance, any significance, any meaningful destiny or purpose. Sometimes we wonder if anybody, anywhere, really loves us. It's the same question, asked from the heart instead of the mind. Of course, if we struggle like that over our own personal identity, the importance of humanity itself cannot be very clear or certain in our own mind. No wonder we have trouble trying to understand or define Jesus!

Please forgive this wordy introduction. There are times when we need to claim our truth and, if necessary, die for it. But it's just us here,

right now, in this moment, and sometimes we need to admit that the search and the journey are not all cut-and-dried. How else can we be friends together on the journey, or help each other very much? I don't think we want to be a fellowship where every time somebody asks a real question, they get a formula-truth shoved down their throats.

Much of our dilemma is alluded to in Christian theology under the category of "The Fall." Do not think *only* of the Garden of Eden story. That merely introduces the problem. The whole concept of this earth-place as a lost and alienated realm, imperfect and incomplete, is basic to all Christian understanding. We are not perfect here – we are not whole – and nothing here is. That also applies to the way we approach and describe truth, to all our relationships, and to all of our best things, not just our worst things. We have reason for profound humility, even when we are being Christian, even when we are being patriotic, even when we celebrate the wonder of motherhood and family love. Always when we remember God, humility is mixed with gratitude ... and turns into love.

We sense a truth and a reality beyond anything we have known, yet we cannot reach it, even though we hunger for it and strive toward it. Sadly, even our striving is corrupted by our place and experience in this half-life, this broken world, this realm full of Pinocchios longing and trying to become real people. You are not the only one who feels this way, you know; the others just don't say so very often, for the same reasons you don't. So how do we know anything correctly or do anything rightly when everything is already and always affected by this alienation and partiality? How do we know what to do to truly live, when everything we have ever known has always died?

This awareness of the lostness and brokenness of this world is the foundation of all Christian conviction about our need for a Savior. And it is the reason Christendom is never willing to settle for lesser titles for Jesus or to share His place with other historic people, however interesting or impressive. If we live in a broken realm, we do not need a teacher, a friend, a counselor, a president, a warrior, or a judge, though all of these can be nice, and even helpful as far as they go. If we live in a broken world, we need a Savior. Convinced that we were *sent* a Savior, Christendom is not willing to share that title with people who are teachers, friends, counselors, gurus, presidents, warriors, or judges. *"For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced*

that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." (II Corinthians 5:14-15) It is not a title, nor is it an "office" you can run for. It doesn't matter how much I might admire Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha or Paramhansa Yogananda the Seer – that doesn't turn either one of them into a Savior. Nor, by the way, do their titles, or the religions they founded, suggest that this is their function.

A quick review: We have trouble knowing who Jesus is because we have trouble knowing who we are. We have trouble discerning or moving toward the truth because our own perspective is always and already corrupted by our own subjective experiences. We live in a broken, alienated world – that is, a realm estranged from God. We need a Savior. It is the Christian Faith (not fact – faith) that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ – the Savior sent from God.

You do not have to believe that. Nothing is trying to make you believe that against your will. Oh, you might run into a few individuals who *try* to make you believe it against your will, but they have no understanding. They are just trying to paint by numbers to keep from facing the dark. They don't mean the harm they do, any more than we do.

The thing that often escapes notice, or at least it keeps escaping mine, is that being sent a Savior strongly implies that we are worth saving. This "worth," I think, is never very clear to us. The Creator values us more highly than we can comprehend, and the clear fact is that we do not believe it. For reasons we cannot comprehend, we are sent a Savior (which is why we call it "grace"). It is, then, a pure ACT OF FAITH to claim the worth that is being revealed, although we do not understand it at all. (*"This is my body broken for you ... my blood shed for you."*) There is an inevitable connection between recognizing Jesus' true identity, and getting a strong hint that your own identity is higher than you thought. While the connection is inevitable, it is not automatically noticed or accepted, even among Christians.

If you truly receive and accept the communion meal today, you participate in a mystery that makes many unearthly claims. One of those claims is that you are a higher order of being than you know or realize. If not, this particular body and blood could never, ever be broken or poured out for you; if you took it into yourself, it would be violently thrown off, as the body throws off every organ or cell it considers foreign

to itself. This is the part of the Christian Faith that is even harder to face and deal with than whatever we think or conclude about Jesus. That is, believing in Jesus seems hard enough to many of us, but what believing in Jesus does to what we believe about ourselves – that’s the hardest thing of all!

Let’s get back to Jesus for a few moments. (Whew! Anything to get the spotlight off of us.) What is the most difficult or traumatic thing about His story? There is more than one good answer to that question, but for me, it’s the trouble Jesus caused with goodness. That continues to amaze and dumbfound me. No matter how familiar this becomes through repetition and study, it remains startling. Apparently I’m a slow learner. I was raised to think that evil caused trouble, and that everybody liked goodness. I was raised to think that being bad got us into trouble, and that being good would bring approval, appreciation, sometimes even rewards. Philosophically, I understand that God wouldn’t dream of designing a world this way, lest we do the good only for the rewards and never learn to love the good for its own sake. Nevertheless, that’s the way I was raised to think, and I have had a hard time getting over it.

The Message of the New Testament is set in the context of a story which proves that human beings do not trust goodness and do not believe in goodness. Over and over, the Gospel writers ask, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways: Why did Jesus have to die? (What had my Lord done?) What were the crimes to deserve such a death? He healed the lame; made the blind to see; gave hope to the hopeless; taught about caring, loving God, and living for a Kingdom higher than this physical plane – a Kingdom both in and beyond this world. For *this* He became Public Enemy Number One?! For this He was hated and condemned – not only by evil men, but by some of the best, most sincere, most religious and conscientious humans the world had ever produced? Nevertheless, it was *goodness* that got Jesus into trouble. *You* understand this, I know. People who do not understand this know zilch about Jesus, and know nothing at all about the Christian Faith. Nonetheless, I seem to be endlessly amazed and stupefied by it.

IT WAS GOODNESS THAT GOT JESUS INTO TROUBLE. Sometimes I think of the jealousy that must have been operating. That was part of it, but not all of it. Sometimes I reflect on what it must have been like for the Sanhedrin and the Pharisee teachers and

scribes to be confronted with this New Movement that made their views and their reform movement seem inadequate. Hurt pride had to be part of it, but surely not all of it. *What* then? Their deepest conviction of all was that Jesus was doing and saying things so good, there had to be an ulterior motive. None of the teachers or political leaders believed that goodness could exist in this world on the magnitude Jesus was displaying it. It had to be a ruse, a strategy. They were absolutely sure that Jesus was after something He was not revealing. The longer they watched, the more convinced they became that Jesus was incredibly dangerous. And they were right! But not for any of the reasons they suspected. It is imperative for us to know why.

Goodness is as dangerous in this world as evil. That is, disruption, change, and turmoil will result in this realm as quickly from goodness as it will from evil. If you don't believe it, start treating your neighbor's children as if they were the most precious people in the world. In less than a week, you will have some very nervous, jealous and, if you don't stop it, angry parents on your hands. A broken, estranged, alienated world *means* that goodness is not at home here. Goodness is not peaceful here. If you become well-adjusted and mature here, you are far from God. If you learn to get along well and be successful here and that's all you are doing here – that is, if you are content to leave it at that – then you are a disgrace to the Kingdom. Did Jesus know this? (If He didn't, I sure wouldn't.) Listen to Him: *“Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets. But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger. Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.”* (Luke 6:22-26)

We live in a broken world. Goodness is as “foreign” and “wrong” here as evil. Goodness will cause you every bit as much trouble here as being bad. (I actually believe it will cause you more trouble than being bad, but I'm being extremely careful today not to overstate anything.) While some of us may not know this on the conscious level, we all know it on the subconscious level. The problem is that in knowing it on the subconscious level, we *avoid our goodness* and shield against knowing it, admitting it, or living by it. These shields are thick, high, and maintained

with twenty-four-hour surveillance. The subconscious knows that goodness can get us killed, just like it did Him. All of us are cutting back our goodness all the time. Yet Jesus knows that if He cannot get through the shields to awaken our goodness, we will never be fit for the Kingdom. Therein lies the great battle for the soul, which is the true drama of the New Testament and the Christian Way.

Answer these questions (if you dare): In a group of truly good friends, would you be more comfortable admitting to some fault, or admitting to some virtue? Would you rather share a story of some mistake or blunder or character defect, or a story that reveals what a wonderful or righteous person you really are?

Very few people will tell me of their goodness without enormous encouragement and patience on my part. They admit fairly easily to all manner of stupidity, immorality, low-grade selfishness, anger, fear, etc. They know I will understand because I'm so at home with such things myself. But they are terribly cautious about mentioning any truly good qualities or motives or purposes. They don't think I can grasp or appreciate that.

Instinctively, of course, they know that revealing the good will get them hated, or at least misunderstood. Only, it's worse than that: On the conscious level, after all the years of repression, people even suspect that perhaps their own inner goodness is just an aberration, a false front. Maybe if they bring it out, I might find some way to reveal its falseness, and that would be too painful for words. So they keep true goodness hidden from me, and from themselves. Niceness, of course, is okay. But I'm not talking about good manners. I'm talking about goodness.

Have any of you engaged in psychotherapy? What was the focus? Childhood trauma, problems with parents and siblings, low self-esteem, anger, fear, betrayal, abandonment? How much time was spent helping you come to terms with your idealism, your nobility, your generosity and courage and love (I mean, without mocking or denying it)? Did you go over the memories of the times you were too generous or loving or forgiving and paid heavy prices for them? Did you get help to return to that goodness, and to not care what price you had to pay for it?

We are trying to build a world where humility is a disease; where service stinks; where ideals are naive; where nobility is an aberration;

where love is just some weak person needing approval. We cannot admit that there is any true goodness within us, and so it becomes harder and harder to imagine that it could exist in others. Naturally, we are having more and more trouble with Jesus.

“What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor.... He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brethren.” (Hebrews 2:6-11) Who is this “brother” of ours? This One who *“reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power”*? (Hebrews 1:3) Nevertheless, we are ashamed or afraid to find or admit any goodness within us?

It is my own conviction that most of us come into adult consciousness believing that we are evil, or at least “dark,” at the very core of our being. Some of us make jokes about it and some of us try desperately to hide it, but that is the conclusion. Goodness is a facade. If you cut beneath any of our good motives, you will come to a deeper anger, hurt, fear, or hatred. Most people do not spend much time in contemplation or in prayer and meditation because they know it will take them into this labyrinth of dark motives and evil desires. They do not want to spend time with the inner being – time with themselves or their God – because it is too dark a journey.

Truly it is a terrible bind and paradox. We must have *some* kind of hope or trust that we will find light and love at the center, or we do not dare go find out what *is* at the center. The Good News of Jesus the Christ is not only that Jesus is the Savior and that God is love. If you are truly dark or evil at the core and God loves you – loves that which is truly evil – then *God* would be evil, and that is not good news.

No, the Good News of Jesus the Christ is not only that God is love but that *YOU* are good at the very core of your being – that there is light and love at the center of who you really are; that underneath all the darkness, pain, anger, fear, and bad behavior, you are God’s true child, created for life and love and light. Your true identity is far higher than you know. Goodness is not the aberration – evil is. Satan is the Father of Lies, and we have to stop believing the lies about who we are and what we are like. You are good to the very core of your being. The fear, resentment, anger, doubt, and worthlessness – and all the

other stuff that clings to you so convincingly in this broken place – are all temporary. It is your *goodness* that is genuine. It is your goodness that will survive. Goodness is tough stuff, you know. After all you have done to beat it out of yourself, it is still there, eager and waiting.

Goodness will always be a problem in this world. It will always get you into trouble here. Some of you do not like trouble. You always want to switch from evil and darkness into neutral, where you can find peace and be left alone. You have the wrong religion and the wrong Savior, if that's what you want. Goodness is always trouble in this world, at least as much trouble as evil. Jesus is always trouble in this world. You can follow Him out of bad trouble into good trouble, but never into neutral. I must remember! I hope you will try to remember too. The realm that loves goodness comes later.

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COMMUNION REFLECTIONS

Not many places, or many sources, give us genuine help with the problem of goodness. But to be truly alive, we must acknowledge, honor, and respond to the goodness within, knowing full well that it is immensely dangerous in this world. It does not help to just use positive words, or pretend that we think we are good. It takes true authority to break us out of the traps and assumptions on which this world is run. It takes authority wiser than the wisdom of this world ... and stronger than death.

“This is my body, broken for you – my blood, poured out for the redemption of your souls.”

Jesus' most difficult task (Mission Impossible) on this earth is to reveal that God our Creator loves us truly and personally. The Savior's Mission is nearly impossible because, aside from our struggles to believe in God's love, we cannot receive any such love as long as we believe ourselves to be evil at the core. We must be touched by the Savior's love that goes into, through, and past all our evil and anguish and guilt and shame – right to the core of our beings. Then we can begin to receive God. Then we can begin to admit, and live by, the goodness we find within and all around us. It is amazing that so much could have been there all along, but we did not notice, or trust it.