

Sermon 2-24-19
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W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the Second Lesson for The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany,
1 Corinthians 15:21-42

Made Alive

I begin this morning with innovation. Centuries of human innovation have brought us the civilization we live in. The only reason you can drive an automobile is because of thousands of accumulated innovations.

The reason human beings are creative and innovative is because our Creator is. And His creation goes from the incredibly small to the incredibly large. As far as we know an atom is an incredibly small universe of even smaller particles. Yet collected together, atoms build the world and the universe. And as far as we can see in most directions the universe is filled with billions of galaxies. The creation is monumental in both directions – large and small. And this brings us to the issue of our place in it.

There are only two possible explanations for the existence of the universe – the pagan and the monotheistic. All forms of paganism consider the universe to be uncreated, self-existent and eternal. No one made it. It just exists, as it always has. And poorly understood mechanisms within it make it what it is. Human beings are just the accidents of such a universe. And we are entirely on our own. Therefore, the power to shape our own world is very important to us. And all forms of paganism exert power.

But Christians accept the other possibility. There is an uncreated, self-existing eternal and divine Creator of everything visible and invisible. By definition, Yahweh is far greater than the universe He has created. And everything in this universe is by His design. Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God....” Thus, we are definitely not on our own. We are totally beholden to our Creator here. And in the resurrection, those in Christ will be joined in joy with their Creator forever.

Now, this business of being beholden to our Creator is why human beings have preferred the pagan explanation of things down through the centuries. Rebels want the power to shape their own universe. But, how did things get this way? Why is it that we prefer paganism, even though paganism’s explanation leaves us in a meaningless universe of disaster and death? Why is it that we desire to avoid our Creator at every turn? The answer is in the creation itself.

When Yahweh created the heavens and the earth trillions of possibilities were open to Him – probably much more than trillions. But what came from His mind is the reality we live in and are exploring through science. In creating, Yahweh made choice after choice after choice. Like our Creator, we do the same thing in any construction project – such as the one we’re now completing.

When Yahweh was finished with His project, there were three salient realities. The first is that everything He chose and completed was good in His sight. For instance, when it says, “And God saw that it was good,” as it does in Genesis 1:12

after the third day of creation, it means that whatever God created that day was just the way He wanted it. He had made His choices among all the possibilities open to Him. What He chose He declared good. What He rejected He considered not good. The possibilities He rejected became evil in His sight.

The second reality is that when Yahweh created life, He created each species with original rules of behavior that were good in His sight. This included the species made in His image – angelic beings and human beings. We know from Scripture that angels can appear as if they are human. But they are spirit beings designed to live free of bodies. Human beings, on the other hand, are spirit beings designed to live joined to a physical body.

Our bodies constrain us in many ways. We can't fly, flatten out to squeeze under doors, run at 70 miles per hour and spend long periods of time underwater. But if there's something a human body can do, we can rest assured that some idiot .. I mean someone will try it.

So, there is a range of things the human body can do. There is a range of things the human spirit can do. There is a range of things human ability can do. We're designed to exist, live, and act within that range. And so we innovate according to our ability.

Then there is the third and greatest reality. Yahweh designed each of His creatures for relationship with Him and with each other. This is the bond of love. Twice in the fourth chapter of Saint John's first letter we read, "God is love." In other words, Yahweh is absolutely committed to the well being of His creation. He is absolutely committed to all the souls within His creation. He is passionately committed to their existence, their good, their welfare and nurture. If there is love and commitment among human beings, it's only because our Creator is the source of all love and commitment for all His creatures.

And so Yahweh created both angelic beings and human beings with a capacity to enter into willing and intimate relationship with Him. Yahweh created these two species with the power to love Him actively, passionately and with great commitment in return.

Now, love is a peculiar thing. Love is not love unless there is the freedom to walk away from a relationship. Love cannot be compelled. That's tyranny, slavery or rape. Both parties must be in agreement. Otherwise, it's stalking or something similar.

Therefore, when the God who is love created both angels and humans, He gave each the option to walk away from Him and His love. He also gave Himself the option to walk away from us – something He never does as long as we're alive on this earth.

God has not revealed to us how His covenant of love with angels was expressed, or how Lucifer came to despise His Creator and break covenant. But from Lucifer's actions in the Garden of Eden, we can surmise that Lucifer/Satan came to desire one thing above the love of his Creator. He desired the right to play God and define good and evil for Himself. For, that's what he deceived Eve with. That was and is his rebellious message: "Be your own god."

We do know how God's covenant of love was expressed with humans at the very beginning. It was through the fruit of two trees – the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It's possible that if Adam and Eve had eaten of the Tree

of Life, they might have become invulnerable to any temptation through the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But that didn't happen. Therefore, they were vulnerable when Satan appeared.

But as created, they were without sin. Therefore, how does someone tempt a perfect, sinless being? You don't tempt such a being directly toward obvious evil. Rather, you tempt them toward what appears to be the good. You invite them to define the good for themselves, apart from Yahweh. Satan did this to Eve and Adam. He also did it to Jesus in the wilderness. Probably he had done it to himself, causing his own downfall.

Something is good only because Yahweh declares it good. A behavior is good only because Yahweh declares it good. This is the key to everything.

This is how we get into trouble with Socialism, for instance. It reaches for what looks like a great good – a utopia of equality and prosperity. But nowhere does God command that we establish or attempt to establish such a thing on this earth. And every attempt to impose utopia in the last hundred years has resulted in great destitution. Most horribly, the total of all attempts at Socialism these last hundred years has resulted in the slaughter of tens of millions. This should prove that Socialism is inherently evil. But on paper it still fascinates us, looking like a great good. Just the other day the Pope said that Christians should not be afraid to look like Communists in doing good. I'm not afraid to show compassion to those who need it. But based upon the last hundred years, I flatly refuse to look like Stalin, Maduro or Che Guevara.

So, in the Garden of Eden was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. What's good and what's evil – this is a knowledge that by definition our Creator alone possesses. He knows the perfection He has willed for us. He knows everything He has rejected as imperfect. And Yahweh has made all this known to us in His Law.

Now, Adam and Eve didn't have a body of Law because they didn't need one. The Law of God was written on their hearts. They lived and breathed God's total goodness. For as we're told in Genesis 1:26-27, they were made in the glorious Image of God. They only knew the good – God's glorious good. They were created the equal of their Creator only in one characteristic, an essential one – righteousness, goodness.

In the Image of God, Adam was the guardian of the created universe. Based upon Adam's covenant love for Yahweh and Yahweh's love for him all things evil, including death, would be kept out of the creation. How do we know this? It comes from this morning's second lesson. We read in 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, "21 For since death came through a man [Adam], the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man [Jesus]. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." If Jesus has the power and authority to restore all things to God's perfect goodness, then Adam originally had the power and authority to maintain all things in God's perfect goodness. Adam had God-given power and authority to keep death and evil out of this universe. Adam was Yahweh's appointed guardian of Yahweh's universe just as Jesus now is. This is why Jesus is called the second Adam. He succeeded where the first Adam failed.

But Eve and then Adam succumbed to what looked like a greater good – becoming like God, knowing good and evil. The trouble is that in reaching for what

looked like a greater good, they rebelled against the great good they already knew from the mouth of God – namely not eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

So, in this initial action of unbelief they disregarded Yahweh's Word in favor of Satan's word. Thus, they relinquished the glorious Image of God and reached out for the rebellious Likeness of God instead. In their rebellion they established themselves in Yahweh's place, defining good and evil for themselves and acting upon their definitions. Thus, they brought Yahweh's judgments down upon themselves.

However, the problem was and remains that "in Adam all die." What they did, we have inherited. For our sinful nature is pure rebellion against Yahweh. The sinful nature is determined to define good and evil for itself and to act upon those definitions.

Thus, anyone can call what is evil, good, and vice versa. Want to rob a house? Just call it good for you, too bad for the people you're robbing. Think God's Law is evil? Just ignore it and do your own thing. As it says in Isaiah 5:20-21, "20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight." We were meant to live in the light and to be wise in the ways of our Creator, but by nature we cannot.

Nevertheless, as we're told in this morning's lesson if in Adam all die, in Christ all will be made alive. There is a new world coming. That's the huge promise of 1 Corinthians 15. The love of God will prevail in power. His love will prevail even over physical death. His love will in fact usher in perfect utopia on the great day of Christ's coming.

The promise is both real and secure because it is founded on real events in this present age. Yahweh sent His Righteous and Innocent Son the first time as a suffering servant. Jesus achieved victory over death in Adam's place by being obedient unto death – even the worst kind of death, death on a cross as a common criminal. The death of God's holy and righteous Son achieved atonement and redemption for the whole human race. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Becoming the righteousness of God, being made finally as righteous as our Creator, that's the path Jesus has believers on. It's nothing less.

Utopia created by human will and power is not possible here. The blood of tens of millions has proven it. And it is written in 1 Corinthians 15:50, "I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." Therefore, only Yahweh Himself can institute His perfect Kingdom on the Day He has chosen. This is the great Christian hope.

But Lord Holy Spirit grants more than hope to the believer in Jesus Christ. As it says in Hebrews 11:1, faith makes things hoped for substantive – Kingdom of God reality in the present fallen reality. This is how Jesus could declare in Luke 17:21, "... 'the kingdom of God is within you.'" And in Matthew 18:20, "... 'where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.'" This is Christ's Church.

And out of the substance of Christian hope, Christian civilization was born. Magnificent cathedrals and other great works of architecture were built. In

Christendom, towns and cities were designed to reflect the connection between heaven and earth won by Christ. Great literature, art and music have come forth out of the substance of the hope Christians have.

All these works will eventually perish. But the Word of the Lord upon which they are based will never pass away. Jesus said so.

So, let us end by reflecting on the great hope proclaimed by the Apostle Paul in 1Corinthians 15:22-27, "22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. 24 Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

In the end we who have put our faith in Messiah will be resurrected into the Image of God. The Law of God will finally be written on our hearts as it was meant to be. We will be healed of the rebellion. The great craving to define good and evil for ourselves will be gone with all of its sin-craving power. The power to actually love our Creator God as He loves us will be in us. The power to love one another as we have been loved by God will be natural and complete. The righteousness of the Son of God will belong to His people.

It is in expectation of such great things that Christians have changed the present world and continue to do so. In Jesus Christ there is a mystical union between we redeemed sinners and our Creator God. It is a most powerful relationship that reshapes the very way we look at life and live it. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.